The New Criterion

November 1990

A monthly review *edited by Hilton Kramer*

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The New Criterion *November 1990*

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Neal Kozodoy is the editor of *Commentary*.
Samuel Lipman's new essay collection, *Arguing for Music, Arguing for Culture*, will be published next month by David R. Godine.
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William Jay Smith's *Collected Poems 1939-1989* was published last month by Charles Scribner's Sons.
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Karen Wilkin wrote about Hans Hofmann at the Whitney for our September issue.

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Notes & Comments: November 1990

A nostalgia for disaster

"After the Mosaic-prophetic summons to justice, after early Christianity, Marxism constituted the third of the major blueprints of hope." This remarkable sentence appeared in a recent issue of *The New Yorker*. The occasion—the ostensible occasion, anyway—was the publication of Bertolt Brecht's *Letters, 1913-1956*. The author was the American expatriate writer George Steiner. What had moved Mr. Steiner to make this extraordinary utterance and enlarge upon its implications wasn't anything he found in Brecht's letters, however. He was clearly in deep mourning over the collapse of Communism in East Germany and in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union, and eager to share his sense of loss with readers on this side of the the Atlantic who could not be expected to understand the nature of the Marxist "blueprint" or the meaning of its extinction.

Communist East Germany, according to Mr. Steiner, had something that the United States —now said to be, like the Soviet Union, "receding into colossal, lamed—if occasionally belligerent—provinciality"—could make no claim to. "Marxism, being itself the product of an intelligentsia, notably in East Germany," he wrote, "felt committed to certain archaic, paternalistic ideals of high literacy, of literary-academic culture. Classical theatre and music, the publication of the classics flourished." That there were vexing problems even in this cultural utopia, Mr. Steiner readily acknowledged. "Ineluctably," he wrote, "collectivist-socialist ideals seem to lead to one or another form of the Gulag." He even spoke of "the homicidal labyrinth of Leninism and Stalinism." Yet in Mr. Steiner's moral reckoning, the Marxist "blueprint of hope" transcended such catastrophic vicissitudes, if only because it remained untainted by what he called "the yawp of money" and "the stench of greed"—in other words, capitalism.

Mr. Steiner was nothing if not candid in spelling out the implications of his belief in the moral superiority of Marxism. "Those who were wrong, hideously wrong, like the Bolsheviks, the Communards in France in 1871, the International brigades in the Spanish Civil War, the millions who died proclaiming their fidelity to Stalin, were, in a paradoxical, profoundly tragic way, less wrong than the clairvoyant, than the ironists and the yuppies, than the Madison Avenue hype peddlers and the jobbers 'bellowing' on the floor of the bourse. . . . It is better to have been hallucinated by justice than to have been awakened to junk food." Which, translated into the language of political reality, can only mean that it is better to murder—and murder in the millions—in the name of some imaginary "justice" than to see McDonald's doing business in Red Square.

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This was not, to be sure, Mr. Steiner's first attempt to stem the tide of moral inquiry into the nature of Marxism and the revolutions enacted in its name. It will be recalled that upon the publication of Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's *Gulag Archipelago* Mr. Steiner had treated us to an indignant defense of Lenin and the Bolshevik Revolution; and upon the three volumes of Leszek Kolakowski's *Main Currents of Marxism*—the most comprehensive and magisterial of all the critiques that have lately been devoted to Marxist theory and practice—he likewise lavished his fury. There can be no doubt that for Mr. Steiner, as for so many other intellectuals of our time, Marxism has remained a faith—indeed, a religious ideal—that is not to be judged by the mundane standards of historical evidence or earthly suffering. Marxism as an ideal remains the crucible of all virtue and the measure of all salvation, whereas capitalism is to be seen as synonymous with sin and damnation. It seems never to have occurred to Mr. Steiner, by the way, that in assessing the "blueprints of hope" that have won the allegiance of the world's least privileged people, the United States—owing to both its democratic political system and its promise of economic opportunity—has proved to be a more potent ideal than Marxism ever has been for those free to make the choice.

It would be pleasant to believe that Mr. Steiner's diehard faith in the moral superiority of the Marxist ideal and its corollary detestation of capitalism was now an isolated case, but an acquaintance with the intellectual press in this country suggests otherwise. In last month's *New Republic*, for example, Irving Howe once again offered us a defense of the "idealism" that was alleged to have inspired "even the most brutal," as he said, of the Communists he had known, and warned—his sense of irony for the moment paralyzed—that "Man cannot live by commodities alone." Acknowledging that in the downfall of Communism "A dream long corrupted has now been shattered," Mr. Howe nonetheless clearly yearned for a return to the old-time religion, thus reminding us that out of the ashes of the Marxist collapse there is now rapidly emerging in the West a new wave of nostalgia for the old socialist ideal. Which, given the ghastly experiences of this century, can only mean a nostalgia for disaster.

Yet another variation on this nostalgia for the old Marxist "blueprint of hope" came from Simon Leys in a recent number of *The New York Review of Books*. To Mr. Leys's eloquent writings on China, especially his book *Chinese Shadows*, we owe a good deal of what we know about the horrors of Mao's regime, and in this latest of his essays he confirms the scale of those horrors with figures even more chilling than any we have seen in the past. "The human cost of [the 'Great Leap Forward' and the 'Cultural Revolution,']" he writes, "was staggering: the famines that resulted from the 'Great Leap' produced a demographic black hole into which it now appears that as many as fifty million victims may have been sucked. The violence of the 'Cultural Revolution' affected a hundred million people." And so on.

Yet in conclusion even Simon Leys, revealing himself to be as much a fundamentalist in his faith as Messrs. Steiner and Howe, exempts Marxism from any role in this historic catastrophe. "Marxism," he writes, "has acquired a very bad name in China—which is quite understandable, though somewhat unfair: after all, it was never really tried." This, apparently, is to be the new alibi for the true believers in the Marxist "blueprint of hope"—that it was never really tried *anywhere*! Which inevitably raises the question: How many times will Marxism have to be tried—and at what cost—before it will be acknowledged by its intellectual acolytes that it has indeed been tried, over and over again, in nations large and small, and found to be a failure on a scale more disastrous to human life than almost any other "blueprint" in history?

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Making Cage a master

At this point in the evolution of our language, the word "master" means many things to many people. Still, one wonders just which definition the Public Broadcasting Service had in mind last September when it featured the putative composer John Cage in its "American Masters" television series.

"American Masters" is, or at least is publicly funded as, an arts program. In line with the usual idea of whom an arts program should celebrate, "American Masters" has concerned itself in the past with those who might plausibly be thought to fit squarely one of the most trenchant meanings *The Oxford English Dictionary* gives for the word "master": "An artist of distinguished skill, one of those who are regarded as models of excellence in their art." In line with the *O.E.D.*'s formulation, the series has in the past brought to television the lives and achievements of such indubitable masters as Aaron Copland, Eugene O'Neill, Isaac Bashevis Singer, and even (for a humorous change of pace) Buster Keaton. Despite the enormous differences separating these artists —and the other "American Masters" subjects—from each other, they all shared the one common, and defining, trait of artistic mastery: rational control of a body of rigorously chosen material.

Now, for our study and admiration, we are given John Cage. Unlike the "American Masters" before him, Cage exercises no rational control, and he chooses no material. Instead he mocks the very notions of reason and control, and avoids choice by choosing chance, as revealed to him through the use of the Chinese oracle book, the *I Ching*. He glories in his musical inabilities, bragging that he has no talent for harmony; he bases his work on the conviction that all sounds, whatever their origin or their character, are equally music.

It must be said that the PBS television program was vintage Cage. Here was extensive documentation of many of his routines: *Speech*, a mocking 1955 composition for five radios and reader; *Minutiae*, a purposely pointless 1952 Merce Cunningham dance piece set to (or rather performed at the same time as) a Cage percussion score; the filming of a chess game between Cage and Teeny Duchamp, the widow of the painter much admired for turning what he called "found objects"—most notably a urinal—into art; and what must be the television premier of the silent 1954 piano piece *4′ 33″*, a work in which the pianist does nothing but open and close the lid covering the keys, and note the elapsed time on a stopwatch. There was, too, ample footage of Cage, in his role as professional mycologist, hunting down (and then cooking) exotic varieties of mushrooms.

In his review of the program, *New York Times* critic John J. O'Connor wrote, "Perhaps the most striking thing about John Cage is his ability to reduce just about anyone in his vicinity to a gentle smile." Mr. O'Connor may well speak for television critics, but for those committed to music and to art, Cage's pronouncements that "I have nothing to say, and I am saying it," and "I don't hear music before I write it," hardly sound gentle. Rather, he sounds like a gravedigger of the traditional aesthetic sensibility built on an idea of ordered beauty. Aggression remains aggression, even when it is disguised as paradox and whimsicality. Doubtless those responsible for "American Masters" felt that in the Cage program they were presenting us with a master of art; in fact, they were only presenting us with a master of our disorder.

After Cincinnati, Brooklyn gives us "the Unspeakable"

Although the court has now acquitted the Cincinnati Contemporary Arts Center and Dennis Barrie, its director, of obscenity charges for exhibiting the photographs by Robert Mapplethorpe that many of us still consider obscene, the issues that brought an American museum director to trial for ex-

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hibiting such works of art have hardly been resolved.

Indeed, it has become clear that the havoc wrought by the Mapplethorpe affair is entering a new and perhaps more virulent phase. The chief lesson of the Cincinnati trial concerns the extent to which radical voices in the arts community—voices that have championed the Mapplethorpe ethos ever since his photographs of the sadomasochistic homosexual underworld became a public scandal some eighteen months ago—have managed to insinuate themselves into the arts establishment at large. A sensibility that was once confined to a fringe of the art world has forced itself into the mainstream and now exercises unprecedented influence. Abetted by liberal hysteria over the putative threat of censorship, this radical view of art, politics, and sexuality has begun to corrupt virtually all institutions concerned with contemporary art. A case in point is the venerable Brooklyn Museum, which—in addition to excellent exhibitions by the American artists Albert Pinkham Ryder and Milton Avery—is currently featuring a large installation by the conceptual artist Joseph Kosuth called "The Brooklyn Museum Collection: The Play of the Unspeakable."

"Unspeakable" is the *mot juste* in several senses. Occupying the Grand Lobby, just inside the front entrance, the installation is a mélange of objects from the museum's permanent collection—paintings, sculpture, photographs, furniture, objets d'art—along with a smorgasbord of quotations from wildly diverse sources emblazoned across the walls in various sizes of type. The objects range from ancient Egyptian artifacts to Renaissance religious paintings, from eighteenth-century Japanese prints to contemporary photographs by Larry Clark and—presumably as a kind of obeisance—Robert Mapplethorpe. One will find some Bauhaus furniture, some Hogarth prints, a marvelous sculpture by Gaston Lachaise, paintings by Matisse, William Glackens, Norman Rockwell, etc. The quotations feature tidbits from Jean-Jacques Rousseau, from Leo Steinberg on the sexuality of Christ, from Adolf Hitler and Joseph Goebbels on Nazi cultural policy, various anthropological musings, and forgotten denunciations of modern art from the Chicago Law and Order League.

Need it be said that Mr. Kosuth's installation—which, incidentally, is funded in part by the NEA—is yet another meditation on the threat of censorship? Never mind that contemporary America enjoys greater freedom of speech—especially when it comes to artistic expression—than any society in history. It must be maintained that we are living under a dire threat of repression. The pretentious flyer accompanying the installation sounds the requisite tone of ominousness: "Whether we will be permitted to see such art in the future, Kosuth maintains, is brought into question by the assault on art going on in the United States today."

But of course what is really brought into question is the Brooklyn Museum's willingness to carry out its curatorial and educational mandate. "The Play of the Unspeakable" does not inspire hope. Like most so-called conceptual art, it deals not in concepts but in intimations and innuendos. To describe it as intellectually negligible would be an unwarranted compliment. Ever true to the methods of "conceptual art," Mr. Kosuth neglects the difficult task of thinking through the issues. Instead, he relies on verbal collage to produce the desired imitation of thinking, what we might call the aroma of thought. Critical discrimination—an activity that museums once rather specialized in—is abandoned in order to hammer home the point about "censorship." Thus Nazi manifestos jostle against philistine rejections of Matisse as if they were both equally noxious; pornographic photographs by Larry Clark are set next to sculpture by Lachaise in order to suggest that rejecting one is tantamount to rejecting the other.

The day we went to see the installation, a busload of school children was wandering around the lobby gawking at photographs

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from *Teenage Lust,* Clark's graphic depictions of teenagers shooting up, exposing themselves, having sex in groups of two and more. *Teenage Lust* raises some disturbing questions about Mr. Clark and the propriety of his exploiting these scenes of degradation as a way of making "art." Yet in some ways even more disturbing is the presence of such objects at an exhibition sanctioned by the Brooklyn Museum. For what they tell us is how far the art establishment, having capitulated to the cynical radicalism that exploded around Robert Mapplethorpe, has now ceded its authority, betraying both its cultural responsibilities and the public trust.

Carnegie Hall at 100

As everyone even vaguely interested in serious music doubtless knows by now, Carnegie Hall is celebrating its 100th anniversary season. The press interviews and releases have borne their predictable fruit, and at this moment little seems to be going on in New York musical life but the chatter of Carnegie Hall congratulating itself.

At the heart of the Carnegie celebration is an expanded concert calendar. Modestly described in the elegant promotional brochure as "THE GREATEST CONCERT SEASON IN HISTORY," "A CONCERT SEASON THAT MUST BE EXPERIENCED TO BE BELIEVED," and "LIKE NOTHING YOU'VE EVER SEEN OR HEARD BEFORE," the calendar includes famous orchestras (Vienna, Amsterdam, Leningrad, Israel, Boston, Chicago, and Cleveland), famous conductors (Sir Georg Solti, Pierre Boulez, Claudio Abbado, and Seiji Ozawa), and famous soloists (Itzhak Perlman, Isaac Stern, Jessye Norman, Vladimir Ashkenazy). There are also chamber groups, pops concerts, folk-song recitals, and four operas done without staging.

Taken as a whole, the 100th season, far from being unparalleled, is a reprise of just what Carnegie Hall was doing in its first seven decades when it was a rental house available to all comers, and of just what it has been doing in the past three decades when it has been taking a more active role in arranging that which appears under its name. What made Carnegie Hall viable when it was merely a space for hire, and what makes it viable today when it acts as a presenter of musical events, is the excellence of its warm and lively acoustics. In this it is superior to Avery Fisher Hall at Lincoln Center, the home of the New York Philharmonic and Carnegie's only rival in town. Music sounds better at Carnegie than it does at Avery Fisher, and it is the Carnegie sound, not the singularity of the Carnegie offerings, that alone undergirds all this year's hype.

But there is more to a great hall—or rather to the responsibilities of a great hall—than keeping good acoustics available to the public. A great hall should have artistic roots; it should provide an institutional touchstone for the musical life of its time. The best way this can be accomplished, and perhaps in Carnegie Hall's case the only way, is to do something those responsible for the hall have sedulously avoided: to sponsor a great resident orchestra, setting the highest possible standards in performers and repertory. It is particularly important in Carnegie Hall's case that it fulfill this task, for since the demise of the NBC Symphony in the mid 1950s in the wake of Toscanini's retirement, the Philharmonic (despite the many visiting orchestras that come in for a night or two at a time) has had no continuing competition.

The resulting monopoly has doubtless been comfortable for the management of the Philharmonic, and perhaps going along with it has even been comfortable for the management of Carnegie Hall. But like all artistic monopolies, the dearth of resident orchestras in New York has only produced a torpid audience atmosphere, an atmosphere nicely co-existing with monopoly's inevitable concomitant, institutional self-satisfaction. If there is one thing to be learned from the current Carnegie Hall hoopla, it is that good sound without enduring substance does not a rich musical life make.

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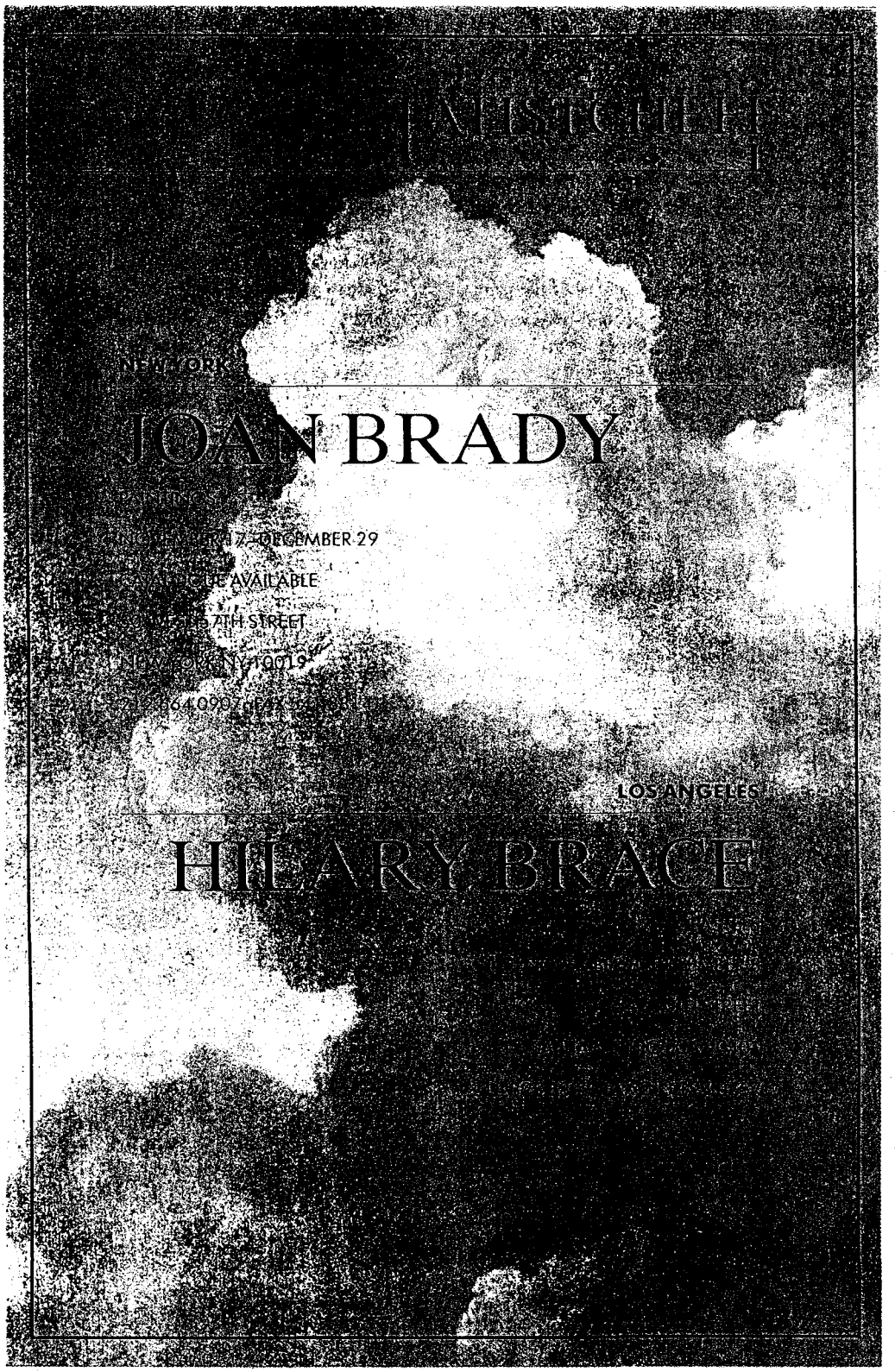

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Art, revolution, and Kazimir Malevich

by Hilton Kramer

There are careers in the arts that epitomize the spirit of their time in so many salient respects that they attain a kind of mythological status in the eyes of posterity. The life and work of the Russian painter Kazimir Malevich (1878-1935), whose art is currently the subject of an extraordinary exhibition, constitute a career of this sort. [1] In every aspect of his endeavors—in his downfall as much as in his triumphs—Malevich was the very archetype of the avant-garde artist in the age of revolution. Embracing without qualm or limit every extreme of belief and aspiration offered up by the tumultuous era in which he pursued his radical ideals, Malevich looked upon art as at once an absolute and an instrument—as pure spirit, on the one hand, and a means of imposing a new social order, on the other. In this view of art and its functions, the work of art was thought to encompass and affect every sphere of life and thought—and to do so, moreover, through the suppression of all visual reference to earthly existence. So total was the mission of art to be in Malevich's conception of it that it was only through the most complete abstraction that both its transcendent and its earthly goals were believed to be fully realizable. Upon abstract art there was thus conferred a burden and a status that in more traditional societies were considered the province of religion, politics, education, philosophy, and culture itself. No wonder Malevich called the movement that he founded Suprematism, for the role that he envisioned for art was nothing less than a universal supremacy in all fields of human endeavor.

That such a conception of art might harbor some profound contradiction, not to say a fundamental delusion; that it might deceive the artist himself as to what was central to his art and what merely circumstantial and peripheral; that in the end it was founded on a misconception not only of what art was capable of achieving but what the realities of life itself consisted of—about none of this does Malevich appear to have been even vaguely concerned while he was riding high as a leader of the Russian avant-garde in the years immediately preceding and following the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917. Though more of a mystic than a political thinker, more indebted to the doctrines of P. D. Ouspensky than to those of Marx or Lenin, Malevich seems nonetheless to have truly believed that the ideas governing his conception of art —ideas that are inseparable from the spiritualist, anti-materialist tenets of theosophy —were in perfect agreement with the ideological imperatives of the new Soviet state.

Malevich was by no means alone, of course, in his conviction that some ideal har-

1 "Kazimir Malevich 1878-1935" opened its American tour at the National Gallery of Art in Washington (September 16-November 4), and will travel to the new Armand Hammer Museum of Art and Cultural Center in Los Angeles (November 25, 1990-January 13, 1991) and the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York (February 7-March 24, 1991).

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mony united a belief in the occult and a commitment to Communism. Theosophy commanded a significant following among artists in many fields at the turn of the century, and not only in Russia; and it was often the case that an allegiance to theosophical doctrine inclined these believers in the occult to seek earthly salvation in utopian or otherwise extreme political positions. Figures as different as the Irish poet William Butler Yeats and the Dutch painter Piet Mondrian followed quite similar courses at the time, Yeats combining his belief in the occult with an attachment to fascism and Mondrian seeking to unite his theosophical faith with some vague notion of an ideal utopian future. What made Malevich's situation so special was the opportunity that the Revolution of 1917 gave to the entire Russian avant-garde to make their dreams of a new world come true. In the vast upheaval of the Revolution, it hardly mattered for the moment that the romance of the occult was not finally reconcilable with the imperatives of a Communist society. In the short term, at least, the occultists and the Communists were agreed in wishing to overturn every tradition and destroy every remnant of the culture and the society of pre-Revolutionary Russia. The result was one of the most bizarre intellectual alliances in the annals of the modern era: an art movement that owed much to the irrationalist, anti-materialist doctrines of the occult was empowered by the Leninist leaders of the Revolution to create a new culture in the name of dialectical materialism.

We have long known about the tragic fate that overtook this misbegotten alliance of art and politics early on in its history. Even before Lenin's death in 1924, many of the stellar talents of the avant-garde had fled into exile—mainly to Germany and France—in order to avoid the catastrophe that was clearly on the way. By 1922, the process of systematically stripping the avant-garde of its powers, which in the first years of the Revolution had been enormous, had begun; and under Stalin modernism was categorically condemned as "bourgeois"—a charge likely to lead directly to the Gulag, if not to the firing squad. The dreams of the avant-garde were quickly supplanted by the long dark night of the Stalinist terror.

It was not the least of Malevich's distinctions that he survived this ordeal, even managing to die of natural causes in his own bed—itself something of an achievement for a figure of his eminence in the Soviet Union in the year 1935. That the price of survival was a fundamental betrayal of his own artistic ideals is made plain for us to see in the current Malevich retrospective—the most complete account of the artist's work we have seen in this country. When we come to the last room in this exhibition and find the painting called *Reapers* (*c.* 1929-32), which depicts in a more or less realist manner three robust peasant women harvesting the grain, the only appropriate response is a feeling of utter revulsion. Not only does the painting represent an abject surrender to Stalin's newly proclaimed doctrine of Socialist Realism, but its very subject matter—those well-fed peasant women harvesting the grain in what looks like a pastoral idyll—is the most cynical propaganda. For it was precisely at this moment in history that Stalin was carrying out his program of collectivization, which caused the deaths of millions of peasants and resulted in the destruction of Russian agriculture.

Even if we knew nothing of Stalin's murderous policies, however, this painting would be difficult to take in purely artistic terms, for it marks a return to everything Malevich had categorically rejected in his art. In the development that is clearly and beautifully traced in this retrospective exhibition, we follow an immensely gifted and adventurous painter as he makes his way through the various styles—from Impressionism and Symbolism to Fauvism and Cubism and Futurism—that have defined the course of modernist art, until the moment arrives when he takes off into a realm entirely his own with the invention of a special form of abstraction. There is something very moving about this exhibition, for Malevich was in many respects a far better painter—once he hit his stride, anyway—than he has generally been thought to be in the past. Certain of his

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Cubist and Cubo-Futurist pictures are undeniable masterpieces of their kind. They owe much to the precedents of the School of Paris, but it was in the nature of the Russian avant-garde to seize upon the most radical of these precedents and then carry them a step further—and to do so, moreover, with a speed and confidence and inventiveness that was often unrivaled elsewhere. Malevich was particularly audacious in this respect. In the Suprematist abstractions he produced in the decade beginning around 1915, he created not only some of the most original abstract paintings of the age but certain pictorial conventions that have continued to serve as guidelines for the more austere varieties of abstract art down to the present time. Compared with the works Malevich produced between 1915 and 1926, much that was acclaimed for its originality and audacity in the Minimalist art of the 1960s, for example, seems distinctly secondhand. Malevich created the aesthetic territory that the Minimalists later colonized and expanded.

I doubt if there has ever been a more beautiful presentation of Malevich's work than the one that Angelica Rudenstine has given us at the National Gallery in Washington, where this retrospective opened its current American tour. The emphasis in the installation and layout of the exhibition in Washington is decidedly—and properly, in my view—on the *art*, rather than on the ideas governing the art; and this emphasis has the salutary effect of establishing Malevich as an aesthetic sensibility, as the successful exponent of certain aesthetic strategies and devices, and thus tends to minimize the politics, the mysticism, and the rest of the ideological baggage that occupied such an important place in the artist's life and thought. This seems to me exactly the right emphasis, for it is *only* as an artist of considerable distinction and originality that Malevich continues to make a major claim on our attention. As a thinker he was quite hopeless. His copious writings, maddeningly repetitious and replete with every kind of mystification about art, politics, history, and the life of the spirit, now can have only a documentary and historical interest for us. There was also in Malevich what can only be described as a certain nuttiness. In no other member of the Russian avant-garde was the confusion of religion and politics quite so complete. He was given to comparing Lenin to Christ, and in what was, perhaps, the most extreme avowal of his irrational conflation of art, religion, and politics, he recommended to his Soviet comrades that Lenin's body be placed "in a cube, as if in eternity," and urged that "Every working Leninist should have a cube at home, as a reminder of the eternal, constant lesson of Leninism," etc. "The cube," writes Robert C. Williams in *Artists in Revolution* (1977), "would symbolize Lenin's immortality. . . . In painting, the cube moving through two-dimensional space at an angle had created the patterns of Suprematism; in life, it would now help to build a new Soviet culture." One hardly knows whether to laugh or cry at the intensity of Malevich's conviction in such matters. Yet it was this same kind of conviction that led to the creation of such an extraordinary body of paintings.

We shall be a long time separating the art of the Russian avant-garde from the political tragedy that encloses it, but it is now more important than ever before that we do so, and this exhibition marks an important step in that direction. Because politics plays such an important role in the life of art today—such a destructive role—there is a tendency to sentimentalize and idealize the political circumstances in which Malevich and his Russian contemporaries produced their art; a tendency, in other words, to make a romance of revolution in its relation to the art of the avant-garde. To do so, however, requires a large measure of historical amnesia. When we come to that last room in the Malevich retrospective and encounter *Reapers*, we find that Malevich, too, was finally devoured by the Revolution he had so ardently supported. He survived by dishonoring the art that won him his place in history. We should not contribute to that dishonor by making a romance of the politics that was finally so murderously at odds with the art often produced in its name.

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Selling Henry James

by Joseph Epstein

The judges have spoken, and I am declared a clear winner. "Don't worry, Mom," as victors by knockout used to say on the old Gillette Friday-night-fight broadcasts, "I'll be home early." The judges in this instance are the students in a Henry James course I taught for the first time to undergraduates at Northwestern University this past spring, and their judgments come in the form of student evaluations. I have just been presented with a packet of these evaluations. To switch from boxing to poker, read 'em and leap, which my heart did, at least briefly, in appreciation for finding my own pedagogical efforts so warmly received. Allow me to quote from a few of these evaluations, partly to give some rough notion of what students who study literature are up against these days and partly out of sheer pathetic vanity:

- Excellent. Perhaps the best course I've taken in college.

- It was refreshing to look at the work [of Henry James] as just *good* literature, and not to have to worry about Marxist, capitalist, feminist interpretations.

- Each class period was among the shortest 110 minutes of my week. Interesting. Stimulating. Controversial.

- It was refreshing to talk about what an author was actually saying, rather than what he wasn't saying or didn't know he was saying. This class was one of the high points of my four years at Northwestern—I'm glad I had it during my final quarter.

- Top-notch—the champagne of academic experience.

That last item reminds me that Mumm's the word—or perhaps ought to have been about such obviously inflated praise. But then I am so pleased that this course seems to have gone over with its audience that perhaps I am a bit out of control. I set out to teach it, I must confess, with some trepidation. I say "with some trepidation," but it occurs to me that I have done most of my teaching with some trepidation, though I have been told that such nervousness as I might feel doesn't show. Something else that doesn't show, at least so long as one is teaching other than foreign languages in the humanities, is one's effectiveness. How much of what one is saying is getting through to students? How much thinking of a subtle or textured kind can one expect to be absorbed by students between the ages of eighteen and twenty-two who, if memory serves, have a few other things on their minds?

Confidence in these matters is for fools. Five or six years ago, a colleague, not normally given to bragging, told me that something quite magical had been happening to his teaching. He didn't quite know how to explain it, but suddenly it all seemed to be

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coming together for him. In class he would find himself making startling connections, things flowed as never before, fascinating, possibly even original insights that had not hitherto occurred to him seemed to be there when he needed them.

That same afternoon I ran into one of the most impressive of the then-current batch of undergraduate literature students. She was quick at acquiring foreign languages; was writing a senior paper on Rilke for Erich Heller; had been earnest enough to sit through an entire course of mine, for no credit, on the sociology of literature, for which she did all the reading and contributed brilliantly to classroom discussion. In a casual, merely making-conversation way, I asked her how her quarter was going. "All right," she said, "but for Professor L.'s class [the colleague mentioned in the above paragraph]. He's so dry, so dogmatic, so clearly talking to himself." Whoops. I took—and continue to take—the moral of that story to be, Never say you are teaching well.

I was not about to say that I do, but I do say that I especially wanted to teach Henry James well. As a graduate student once said to me of another student in a different class who was floundering and about whose fate she was worried, so I now say about Henry James: "I love him, you see." James seems to me the most artistically intelligent, the most subtle, finally the greatest American writer. No other American writer has given me so much pleasure nor, I believe, taught me so much about literature and life. I wanted ardently to get my appreciation for James across. I wanted converts, not to my precise views, but to at least a rough recognition of Henry James's immense achievement.

Before this could be done, I suspected, there was the need to scrape free the barnacles of cliché that have clung to the vessel of James's reputation. The cliché that he was a very great snob—"an effete snob," into the bargain, in Theodore Roosevelt's phrase—must be chipped away. So, too, the notion that Henry James's subject was an impossibly rarified one, that he wrote almost exclusively about people who could really never have existed: unanchored in work, nationally rootless, without financial concern, detached in nearly every way, sheer engines of pure and apparently inexhaustible cerebration. Although Henry James was an immitigably highbrow writer—some would say the first American modernist writer, given his tireless interest in the formal properties of his art—he also happens to have been an extraordinary comedian, in my opinion one of the funniest writers going. The cliché of Henry James as a great square stiffo, the ultimate stuffed shirt, this, too, had to be quickly swept away.

Were my students even aware of these clichés? Difficult to know. But then it is a bit difficult to know what, exactly, is taught to undergraduates nowadays. In the course descriptions that go out each quarter, which I admit to reading in good part for the unconscious humor I find in them, one often encounters offerings promising the latest theory-a-go-go written in the most rococo gibberish. But then there are also standard survey courses and teachers who haven't gone in for the *nouvelle* intellectual diet. My guess is that an undergraduate majoring in English at Northwestern today is likely to have been taught a single work by James—*Washington Square*, perhaps, or *Portrait of a Lady*, just possibly "Turn of the Screw."

I recalled my own introduction to Henry James as an undergraduate at the University of Chicago in the middle 1950s. It came when I was twenty years old in a course in the modern novel taught by Morton Dauwen Zabel. The novel was *The Spoils of Poynton*, a book of 1897, when James had already begun to write in his late—which is to say, more complex and circumambulating—style; and its subject, that of the passing on of a lovingly gathered collection of antique furniture, doubtless must have seemed rarefied in the extreme to a Middlewestern boy to whom the entire notion of "antique" held not the least interest. How much of the novel I could be said to have comprehended I cannot say. Yet I came away with respect for it, which was in part owing to the respect I had for the respect in which my teacher held it. I did at

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least grasp that Henry James was serious stuff, and that if I were one day to consider myself a serious literary man I should have to return to him.

It's probably a bad idea to ask how much anyone gets out of a book. ("None of us," writes Ned Rorem, "can ever know how even our closest friends hear music.") The question is especially complicated when applied to the young. I think of myself at nineteen reading Proust. What was going through my mind? Probably chiefly delight at the notion of myself reading Proust. When young, one does a great deal of reading that, if one is going to be among that small portion of people who go on to take books seriously, will have to be done again. As an earnest student of mine once put it shortly before his graduation, "God, I wish I had a chance to do a second draft on my education." Some of us have been lucky enough to be able to arrange our lives spending the rest of our days putting draft after draft on our education.

Yet a teacher of the young must not dwell on the question of what, even roughly, his students derive from the books he teaches them. My own assumption is that they, or at least the best among them, do not get much less than I do; and I have always tried to teach to the best in the class. To do less would be to lapse into condescension of a kind that would be defeating. This doesn't mean that I don't stop to explain and discuss fundamental matters—how symbolism works, what constitutes style—but I do assume that my students read for the same reasons that I do: aesthetic pleasure and spiritual profit.

Not that this need preclude a certain quiet cozening on this teacher's part. In teaching Henry James I viewed myself as a salesman. Like a salesman, I saw no point in making it any more difficult than necessary for a customer to say Yes. No point, in my view, in throwing anyone in at the deep end of the pool. Not that Henry James's pool has a shallow end; he adored, he positively wallowed in complexity, and toward the end of his life he told his niece that he wished he could find a more elaborate way to pronounce his name. But some Jamesian works are a good deal less daunting than others, and I planned to begin with these, working my way through and up to the more complicated. Here is my reading list in the sequential order that students would be asked to read James:

1. "The Art of Fiction"
2. "The Figure in the Carpet"
3. "The Aspern Papers"
4. *Washington Square*
5. "Daisy Miller"
6. "The Pupil"
7. *The Europeans*
8. "The Turn of the Screw"
9. *The Princess Casamassima*
10. *The Ambassadors* (to be read for the final exam)

Class enrollment was set at thirty students. I wanted the course to be built around discussion of works, for I thought that straight lecturing would be deadly. Something like forty-seven students registered for it, but I closed out enrollment at thirty-six. What their motives—beyond course credit—were in taking the course I do not know. Most were upperclassmen, four were graduate students; the student who wrote far and away the most brilliant examination in the course turned out to be a sophomore.

First day of class, right out of the chute, the sales pitch began. After setting out the ground rules—examinations, papers, grades, attendance—I announced what I took to be the point of the course. This was to establish in their minds an appreciation for the work of one of the most subtle of American writers, an understanding of what constitutes an exemplary career in literature, and, somehow, through all this, I hoped they would take away something that, in ways that could not be predicted, would alter, however slightly, their ways of thinking about life and make them a little bit smarter.

I next touched briefly on a question that, fifteen or twenty years ago, would simply never have arisen—that of "how" we shall read Henry James. "I suppose my answer to

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this question," I said, "is, 'As intelligently as possible.' I do not myself read him as a Marxist, a Freudian, a Deconstructionist, a Poststructuralist; I don't read him to discover that he might be 'elitist,' or 'pro-capitalist,' or 'anti-feminist,' or anything of the sort. One of the interesting things about Henry James is that he makes all these ways of reading seem rather beside the point. I read him for the pleasure of his language, for his wit, for his meaning, which, if I may say so, is not always that easily caught. A critic named Philip Rahv [surely no one in the class, graduate students included, is likely to have encountered that name], who once remarked that James was a secular New Englander, interested in the same moral questions that his fellow New Englanders had been interested in, once formulated James's way of coming at these questions thus: For Henry James 'any failure of discrimination is sin, whereas virtue is a compound of intelligence, moral delicacy, and the sense of the past.'"

Raising the sales pitch slightly, I began, in a brief lecture on Henry James's life, by calling him a genius. A genius, though, I emphasized, of a particular kind. There are no Mozarts in literature, nor Einsteins for that matter, so that Henry James's genius was not of the natural kind but came about as the result of fortunate circumstances—chief among them being born into the James family—and the most careful self-cultivation. And I quoted James himself, in *The Tragic Muse*, on the nature of genius in the arts: "Genius is only the art of getting your experience fast, of stealing it, as it were . . ." It is also, of course, the ability to make the most of this experience, to have the energy and determination to make that experience count and to make it tell in works of art. I also quoted James on another character in the same novel: "Life, for him [one Mr. Carteret], was a purely practical function, not a question of phrasing." To which I added that they, my students, ought to know right off that for Henry James not entirely but in good part life was a matter of phrasing—the right phrasing. I'm fairly sure no one in the room quite knew what I meant.

The second session of class I brought in a photograph of Henry James in his early sixties, my only visual (non-audio) aid. In this photograph, which I acquired some years ago from the Smith College Archives, James wears pince-nez and is without his beard. I asked the students to take a minute or so with the photograph so that they might recall that the man they would be reading all quarter really was of flesh and blood, however godlike at times he may seem. I also suggested that the more penetrating among them might just discover, behind what at first glance seems a most formidable late-nineteenth-century countenance, a slight but very sly humor lurking.

Together the class and I worked our way through the essay James titled "The Art of Fiction." He wrote it in 1884, when he was forty-one, well launched on his career but far from having attained the heights he would soon reach. The essay is too rich to summarize here, but it is about what James calls the "artistic idea" and the variety of possibilities that novels—which "are as various as the temperament of man, and [are] successful as they reveal a particular mind, different from the others"—and all that the glorious form of the novel, then attaining its preeminence as a literary form, was capable of achieving in the hands of serious practitioners. Best as I remember it, the discussion was not exhilarating—it is generally easier to teach imaginative than critical works—but earnest, and at least nothing flat-out stupid was said. I also handed out Xerox copies of a sheet of quotations. The most impressive of these, from James's essay on Turgenev, I read aloud, prefacing it by saying that James himself, in the same essay, remarks that when we read a writer of real power we want to know what he thinks about the world. This quotation, I think, comes as close as any single passage from James that I know to answering that question.

> Life *is*, in fact, a battle. On this point optimists and pessimists agree. Evil is insolent and strong; beauty enchanting but rare; goodness very apt to be weak; folly very apt to be defiant; wicked-

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> ness to carry the day; imbeciles to be in very great places, people of sense in small, and mankind generally, unhappy. But the world as it stands is no illusion, no phantasm, no evil dream of a night; we wake up to it again for ever and ever; we can neither forget it nor deny it nor dispense with it. We can welcome experience as it comes, and give it what it demands, in exchange for something which it is idle to pause to call much or little so long as it contributes to swell the volume of consciousness. In this there is mingled pain and delight, but over the mysterious mixture there hovers a visible rule, that bids us learn to will and seek to understand.

I closed that second class, our first working session, by quoting James yet again: "In every novel the work is divided between the writer and the reader; but the writer makes the reader very much as he makes his characters . . . the reader would be doing his share of the task; the grand point is to get him to make it." Would James be able to turn this trick with these students? Remains, as political journalists hedging their bets say, to be seen.

"Taught what seemed to me a decent class yesterday," my journal for March 30, 1990, reads. "Some bright and earnest kids in the room, I think." The fact is that, over the years, I have had little to complain about in my students at Northwestern. There have been the usual contingent of the mediocre; a vastly smaller contingent of the genuinely hopeless; but always I have come upon a small number of superior students who are capable of passion and intelligence about art and other artifacts of the mind. Northwestern does not do all that well in the snobbery sweepstakes that I think undergraduate education in the United States has become; in rankings that appear in newspapers or news magazines from time to time, it is usually listed in some such slightly dreary position as fourteenth or eighteenth best school in the country. Who knows what this means—and who cares? But what I do know is that, in order to get into Northwestern, which asks high grades and SAT scores, these students have had to have acquired the habits of achievement—which is to say, they do the work. Ask them to read a novel by next Thursday, and generally almost all will have done so; and those few who have not will feel damned guilty about it. I, for one, am glad they do feel guilty.

Originally, the James course was to meet from 9:00-10:30, but then I thought perhaps Henry James at nine in the morning might be pushing it, and so I changed the time to 10:30-12:00. The room we met in was on the fourth floor of an old Charles Addams-like building called University Hall, which had good light and for some reason thirty or so extra chairs, all metal and plastic, many of which seemed to be massed up at the front of the room, giving the joint the feel of an abandoned warehouse once owned by a Scandinavian furniture company. Within a week or so, I learned the names of the students, whom as always I addressed as Mr. and Miss, and had my initial hunches about their differing intellectual quality. A graduate student named Pataky, who spoke ardently and well, could be depended upon to come in anywhere from five to ten minutes late. Soon it began to feel like that strange academic social unit—a class.

I generally began each session by gassing away for twenty or so minutes on a general subject, such as the distinctions between highbrow, middlebrow, and lowbrow art, the meaning and use of irony as a literary method, the relation between morality and the novel, the best short formulation of which, in my opinion, remains that of R. P. Blackmur: "Novels do not supply us with morals, but they show us with what morals have to do." Sometimes I would use my twenty or so minutes to talk about a more strictly Jamesian subject: James's friendship with Edith Wharton; the history of his reputation; his working methods, including the switch from handwriting his novels to dictating the later books to a typist. But the greatest portion of time in class was given to discussion of Henry James's stories and novels.

Henry James is nothing if not discussible.

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He never comes straight out to tell you what to think, though those of us who have lived long with his fiction have a pretty good notion of his partialities. He had a positive horror of generalization. When T. S. Eliot famously said that Henry James had "a mind so fine no idea could violate it," he did not mean that James couldn't understand or handle general ideas, but instead that his mind was too finely textured ever to be dominated by an idea and that he carried on his own aesthetic operation at a level well above the ideational. "It is the business of literature," wrote Desmond MacCarthy, "to make ideas out of facts." James was content to work with the facts alone—the lush, languorous, lovely facts—and let his readers discover in his writing such ideas as they deemed useful. So that many a Henry James story or novel, ending in renunciation or death, leaves a reader to work out the true meaning of what he has read on his own. Some people hate this challenge; others among us feel that this is precisely how sophisticated commerce between a novelist and his audience ought to be carried on. Naturally, I hoped my students would develop the respect for Henry James and the aesthetic patience required to join the latter camp.

Certainly, the very first story in the course, "The Figure in the Carpet," called for aesthetic patience in the extreme. It is a story about a search for the deep and underlying meaning of a writer's work. "My little point," the writer in question calls it, then enlarges upon his meaning:

> "By my little point I mean—what shall I call it?—the particular thing I've written my books most *for*. Isn't there for every writer a particular thing of that sort, the thing that most makes him apply himself, the thing without the effort to achieve which he wouldn't write at all, the very passion of his passion, the part of the business in which, for him, the flame of art burns most intensely? Well, it's *that*!"

Readers of James's splendid story will recall that, although most of it is about trying to discover what that little point, the figure in the writer's carpet, really is, we never finally find out. We can only surmise, which is far from everyone's idea of how a story ought satisfactorily to end. What is more, it is very difficult to be human and not draw parallels with the writer in the story and its author and wonder what the figure was in Henry James's own carpet. At least I hoped it was difficult. I put this story first on our reading list because I wanted students to begin thinking of James's general intention, the passion of his passion, the part of the business in which, for him, the flame burned most intensely.

I teach by what is very loosely called the Socratic method, though I am much better dressed and epically less intelligent than the man after whom it is named. Chiefly, I interrogate, sometimes pressing fairly hard, asking four, five, six questions of the same student, yet stopping, I trust, well short of the general tone of the Gestapo. I ask a question, then call on those students who raise their hands. If no one raises his or her hand, I call on someone anyhow. I try quietly to convey that it is a mistake to come to one of my classes unprepared. Nothing wrong with injecting a small element of fear in education. I know fear contributed greatly to my own.

Building gradually in complexity and in length, the course next took up "The Aspern Papers," a *nouvelle*, "the beautiful and blest *nouvelle*," James called it. He was much enamored of the form, for it allowed him to undertake serious psychological examination while practicing what he termed "exquisite economy in composition." I hadn't read "The Aspern Papers" in more than twenty years and on rereading this "other story about Venice" it struck me as even better than I remembered it: more subtle, more powerful, more beautiful. I attempted to teach it around a general issue—that of the correctness of digging into the past of the personal lives of famous people to make them public in the name of scholarship, biographical interest, art, or what have you. I did not neglect to mention, by way of introduction, how lively this issue remained in our own day (the Mencken *Diary* had just been published

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against Mencken's own wishes with serious consequences for the author's reputation), and I brought up the fact that Henry James himself had at one point burned forty years of his own correspondence, lest it fall into the hands of a "publishing scoundrel" like the narrator of "The Aspern Papers."

A number of other ways of approaching the work were available, not least among them as a study into the nature of an *idée fixe*, or, as F. W. Dupee puts it in his book on James, as a book about the "power [of the past] to bargain with the present." But I could have lingered as well on the sheer beauty of James's rendering of his story, fondling details, highlighting descriptions, noting the scores of delicate phrasings. When James speaks of Juliana Bordereau, the aged lover of the dead poet Jeffrey Aspern, he remarks that, as an American, she had first come to Europe before "photography and other conveniences [had] annihilated surprise." Forgive a bit of gushing, but that phrase "annihilated surprise" seems to me worth the entire price of the ticket. I pointed this out in class; I mentioned other lovely Jamesian touches. But when teaching the work of a genuinely elegant prose writer I have always felt that I have never done this element in their work sufficient justice. If poetry is what is left out of translation, it is the fine and artful details that tend to depart in teaching.

The student response to "The Aspern Papers" seemed to me generous in its appreciation. I felt that there was a strong sense in the room of the quality of the work that we had just read and of the superiority of the artistic intelligence that had produced it. Meanwhile, personalities began to emerge, and they were not uninteresting. Of a class of thirty-six students, twelve or so were fairly impressive talkers, and three or four were capable of saying things of the kind that kept the old professor on his own wobbly toes. The class, in other words, had begun to take on character, and it was not a displeasing one. "Students in my Henry James course seem filled with good will," I note in my journal for April 7. "Don't know if my Henry James sell is working, but thus far no one is walking out."

Washington Square, the next book in the course, is a novel that James chose not to include in the New York Edition of his works, *The Novels and Tales of Henry James*, which he prepared for publication between 1905 and 1909. Around the time the Edition began to appear, James wrote to the novelist Robert Herrick that "by the mere fact of leaving out certain things (I have tried to read over *Washington Square* and I *can't*, and I fear it must go!) I exercise a control, a discrimination, I treat certain portions of my work as unhappy accidents." Not a good decision, in my view, for this slender novel, written when James was thirty-seven, continues to stir the mind and agitate the heart of an attentive reader. Dealing with one of the great Jamesian themes—the immorality of an attempt by one human being to dominate the spirit of another, or to use another as a means to his or her own ends—the novel also provides a potent argument against theoretical modes of thinking in its attack on the figure of Dr. Austin Sloper, the successful physician who kills the love and respect in which he was held by his own daughter by treating her as essentially a pawn in a chess game of his own theoretical imagining. Scientific by training, the doctor is a man used to dividing people into classes and types, and, as he avers at one point in the novel, nineteen times out of twenty he is right. The problem is that the twentieth case can be decisive—it can be, this twentieth case, your own daughter. Implicit in this I read James's criticism of scientific—and in our day, social-scientific and psychoanalytic—thought. "Never say you know the last word about any human heart," James wrote, and it ought to stand as the permanent motto for those, great writers and all readers alike, who take their instruction from literature seriously.

In class, discussion of *Washington Square* revolved around the question of how Henry James had taken a relatively small cast of what looked to be fairly stock characters—an ugly duckling daughter, a busybody aunt, a severe

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father, a handsome fortune hunter—and made them vivid and serious and immensely interesting. I recall the talk about this question being of good quality. I raised the question, too, of how James was able to transform his heroine, Catherine Sloper, the ugly duckling daughter, from a rather dreary, misbegotten young woman to a formidable, quite admirable woman of resolute character. I mentioned a formulation of Desmond MacCarthy's in this connection, which runs, if I have it correctly, that in the novels and stories of Henry James only the good are beautiful and there is no shortcut to being good. All that it generally takes to qualify as good in James is consistent kindness, heightened awareness, scrupulosity of behavior, and just possibly an act of renunciation that at the time it is made is likely to seem the moral equivalent of amputation. Yet in James it always, in the elaborate working out of his plots, seems persuasive.

I was putting in a good deal of time in class preparations, and I found I was enjoying myself greatly, looking forward to entering class and feeling a slight drop in emotional temperature after each session was over. This was owing in part to the students, but even more, I believe, to Henry James. A few months before the course had begun, I read some of James's novels that I had not read before (*Watch and Ward*, *Confidence*, *The Reverberator*, *The Tragic Muse*) and reread others that over the years had become blurry in memory (*Roderick Hudson*, *The American*, *The Bostonians*). I also read the one-volume abridgment of Leon Edel's original—and, in my opinion, triumphant—five-volume biography of Henry James. I read some of James's art criticism and reread some of his travel pieces. I read a fair amount of the vast body of criticism of James; and in so doing was reminded how the revival of James's reputation in the 1920s and 1930s, consequent upon the creation in the university of American literature as a respectable academic subject, happily paralleled the emergence of a brilliant group of critics, including T. S. Eliot, Yvor Winters, Lionel Trilling, Philip Rahv, F. W. Dupee, Joseph Warren Beach, William Troy, Edmund Wilson, and Jacques Barzun, all of whom much admired James and wrote interestingly on him. For four or five months, then, I had been living on an almost exclusively Henry James literary diet and felt myself flourishing on it.

Odd but I have found that I can write with enthusiasm about things I dislike—anger, after all, can be an inspiration—but I can only teach with delight what I love. Part of the reason for this may be that, with undergraduate life so brief, it seems pointless to me to waste any portion of it asking students to read and think about third- and fourth-rate things. One can scarcely hope to acquaint them, in the span of four years, with more than a soupçon of the ample quantity of the first-rate available in art and thought. Perhaps this is why the heavy dosage of recent academic talk about changing the canon in undergraduate education has always seemed to me a sad (usually political) cheat, where it has not been altogether beside the point. Besides, I have my own selfish motives for teaching. Apart from doing one's job —teaching the *Kinder* properly—I need to feel some sense of intellectual progress while doing so, usually in the way of feeling I am getting a bit smarter myself, and possibly learning a thing or two about writing. Teaching Henry James allows one to think one is progressing in both ways.

Not that all was euphoria. "Daisy Miller," which I taught to introduce James's international theme—or, as he called it, "the Americano-European legend"—presented a few bumps in the road. ("Daisy Miller" was the story that gave James his initial jolt of fame: the character of the American girl loose on the Continent established a type, as F. Scott Fitzgerald was later to do for the flapper; and James was asked to provide stories of the same kind for other magazines, which, being Henry James, of course he didn't.) One of the difficulties the story provided was that many of James's little jokes about the vulgarity of the Miller family sailed blithely over the heads of students for whom vulgarity isn't currently a vivid category. A

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small business early in the story, for example, has Daisy's younger and thoroughly spoiled brother announce the names of the members of his family each with his or her middle initials: Annie P. Miller, Ezra B. Miller, Randolph C. Miller. The use of the middle initial is a wholly American phenomenon, and James brings it in merely to show the comic combination of American naïveté and pomposity. Explaining this admittedly minor point, I distinctly felt a collective fish eye upon me, as if the entire class were asking itself, "Why is this man bothering to tell us this?"

But the problem went deeper. It felt somewhat strange to explain to a roomful of students who, so far as I knew, had been going at it with their boy and girl friends since high school that there was something quite scandalous about a young American woman going about Rome unchaperoned but otherwise quite innocently with a lower-middle-class Italian. In "Daisy Miller" Henry James wrote a comedy of manners, a rather dazzling one at that, but when manners change radically, as they have in our time, other comedies are played. Or so I felt up there in front of the class explaining what exactly it was that Daisy did to scandalize the American colony in Rome in the last third of the nineteenth century.

Things picked up with "The Pupil," one of James's middling-long stories, written when he was forty-seven and very much at the top of his game. It is a pure Jamesian tale, fascinating in and for itself. It tells that story of a young man who hires on as a tutor to a sickly boy of vastly precocious sensibility and intelligence who is being brought up by a family of failed social climbers who are monstrously unreliable. The tutor quickly senses how extraordinary the boy is, and rather more slowly discovers how shabby is the family. Meanwhile, the two of them, tutor and pupil, in moments of shared fantasy, talk about how fine it would be if they could one day escape the family and live together on their own.

At the close of the story precisely that opportunity arises, and the tutor, vacillating ever so slightly, is caught doing so by the boy, which causes his already weakened heart to fail. It is a story that demands the utmost attention, particularly at the very end, lest the tutor's vacillation be missed. Many students did miss it, and a good discussion followed upon the subject of whether a young boy would have been so delicately attuned as to be able to pick it up. "Why," said one of the best students in the class, who didn't really think so young a boy could pick up so subtle a hint as James provides, "in order to do so, he'd had to be a little Henry James." (As the odious radio performer Art Linkletter used to say, "Don't kids say the darndest things?")

Not long after this I ventured a quotation about "The Pupil" from F. W. Dupee: "A kind of fraternal-homosexual affection unites the boy and the tutor in 'The Pupil.'" Anything to it?, I asked. I myself didn't think there was, though I did not just then say so. But suddenly the discussion in the room was once again enlivened; the class in fact, divided. A few students came forth to say they felt that homosexuality was the key to the story. Another student said that he hadn't really thought of it before, but now that it had come up he discovered a few passages—one of which he read out to the class—that sounded rather homosexier than he had at first realized. On and on it went, unresolved as the bell rang to end the class. In the hall, Miss Jennie Davidson, who has been in another of my classes, remarked dryly that perhaps there ought to be a statute of limitations on discovering homosexuality in literature. No dope, Miss Davidson. At the next class session I simply announced that, for my money, the element of homosexuality in the story, if indeed it could be said to exist, was quite beside the point. But then, I added, you must realize that a critic's work is never done. How many students in the class picked up the irony of that last comment I am not prepared to say. I felt, though, that I owed it to them not to explain it.

It was in "The Pupil," too, that that miserable old hag, Auntie Semitism, staggered into the room. In a line toward the middle of the story James notes of the boy's

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family: "They were good-natured, yes—as good-natured as Jews at the doors of clothing shops! But was that the model one wanted one's family to follow?" Several were the Jewish students in the class. The teacher's last name is Epstein. What was to be done? I offered a brief sermonette—the question had come up near the end of a class—saying that I wished Henry James's work was entirely clear of this sort of blotch, but it wasn't. In this he did not, as he did in so many other ways, rise above his time and social class. I then went on to say that it might assuage people much disturbed by this to know that, in the Dreyfus Affair, James was absolutely on the correct side, applauding Emile Zola's *J'accuse* and deploring the anti-Semitism of such longtime French friends as Paul Bourget, which quite sickened him.

When I asked how many in the class had ever heard of the Dreyfus Affair, none had. Everyone who teaches has stories about what shockingly obvious knowledge the current generation of undergraduates doesn't have. For my part, I must report that I no longer get much worked up by this sort of thing. If I knew anything about the Dreyfus Affair as an undergraduate, it couldn't have been much. Such historical material as most of us possess we come to through our special interests or by simple accident. Thus I know a fair amount about the Russian Revolution but not a single fact about the administration of President James Polk. Perhaps the one serious difference between my students and me at their age is that, I suspect, I was more embarrassed about my ignorance than they, and I may still be.

More significant is what the lack of experience owing entirely to being young does to one as a reader. This came up when we read *The Europeans*, another novel James claimed not to think much of but which impressed me (and F. R. Leavis, among others). In this slender novel, in which the international subject runs the other way round, with two immensely Europeanized Americans visiting their New England cousins, the conduct of the characters and the nature of the situation into which James has inserted them, calls for a reasonably strong flow of generalization on the author's part. "It must be admitted . . . that nothing exceeds the license occasionally taken by the imagination of very rigid people" is a mild example. But the generalization that incited the most strenuous comment was that which reads: "a woman looks the prettier for having unfolded her wrongs or sufferings." What about it, I asked, is this true? Do women look prettier under such conditions?

The young women in the room with conventional—and none were rabid—feminist views felt not. They were generally committed to denying that there are any serious differences between men and women, which may or may not be sound social policy but is certainly tough on literature, which is in good part the historical record of these very differences. Others, male and female, who thought of themselves as operating solely on reason, said that they just didn't see how this generalization could hold up. A few students—all of them women—said, yes, that it seemed to them true, at least when they recalled women they knew who recounted genuine sufferings to them. (Mere kvetching, I insisted, didn't count.) I said that I thought James's generalization true, too, though my word on this point didn't come anywhere near carrying the day.

I asked what checks there were on generalizations, and when no one came forth with any, I said that I could myself think of only two: reason and experience. The interesting problem, I noted, was that experience, as Pascal and other powerful thinkers have testified, frequently outrages reason. I cited an instance from an Anthony Powell novel. In the novel the narrator remarks of another character that he was very quick at picking up speaking knowledge of foreign languages and that, like every other man whom the narrator knew who had this skill, this man, too, was fundamentally untrustworthy. "Crazy," I said to the class, "quite nuts, right?" Much shaking of heads in agreement. "Very well, then, what am I supposed to do if the only four men I have known who are similarly quick at picking up speaking knowl-

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edge of foreign languages are also, yep, fundamentally untrustworthy?" No advice was offered.

As for the hard sell, I thought it going very nicely indeed when, the week that we read "The Turn of the Screw," the class overwhelmingly rejected Edmund Wilson's theory that everything the governess saw and felt during the course of the story was imagined, the result of neurotic sexual repression. The theory was rejected, moreover, on the interesting grounds that, in the class's view, it made the story itself less interesting; that it somehow degraded James's artistic intention; and that, finally, Henry James being Henry James, his intentions ought to be assumed to be of the highest. (Philip Rahv, writing about "The Turn of the Screw," similarly remarked: "So far as intention goes, we should keep in mind that in James we are always justified in assuming the maximum." Don't grown-ups say the darndest things?)

I also sensed, in our discussion of "The Turn of the Screw," a patience with James's ambiguity. Perhaps it had come with all else that we had earlier read of James, but there seemed to be an understanding that for Henry James ambiguity, along with irony and penetrating observation, had its own rich artistic uses. "The Turn of the Screw" is the ultimate tale of ambiguity; it is built upon ambiguity. Edmund Wilson was not wrong when he said that in it "almost everything from beginning to end can be read equally in either of two senses." The story's devastating ending, in which the governess, hitherto entirely a force for good, contributes to the child Miles's death, is itself a paradigm of the ambiguity in the human soul, where good and evil often cohabit. But without the students' respect for James's intentions and understanding of his use of ambiguity, I don't think we could have worked our way through this great *tour de force* of James's with anything like the appreciative reading that emerged.

"May 23, 1990. Taught first flat Henry James class yesterday. Too few students finished reading the 591-page *Princess Casamassima*, the little dears. Too late in the quarter to yell at them." In fact, I was angrier than this journal entry reveals; lest there be any doubt, "little dears" is pure euphemism. The academic quarter was drawing to a close; papers were due in other courses; examinations in other courses would soon have to be taken. Let us not speak of love lives, emotional crises, and simple lassitude, complications not unknown to phylum *studentia*. Still, with the greed of every selfish teacher, I wanted these students to save their very best for me, which, up till now, I think the majority of them had done.

I also wanted to make good use of *The Princess Casamassima* to help nail down my quarter-long hard sell. In many ways it is among my favorite of Henry James's novels. He never availed himself of a larger canvas. Not only is the book filled with rich and beautiful things, but in it James puts to rout almost all the arguments that have been used to make him seem a less complete writer than he really is. The dark third chapter of the novel, with its terrifying tour through Millbank Prison for women, is as good as anything Dickens ever did in the same line and worthy of the great Russians. The cast of characters in the novel ranges through the entire English class system. James's depiction of working-class characters is beautifully brought off, and without a trace of snobbery. "I take no interest in the people," says Mme Grandoni, a secondary yet important character in the novel, "I don't understand them and I know nothing about them. An honorable nature, of any class, I always respect; but I won't pretend to a passion for the ignorant masses, for I have it not." *The Princess Casamassima* is, in fact, a philippic in novel form against political snobbery and shows its dread consequences in the world. It is also the ultimate defense of the literary mode of thought, as opposed to the political or social-scientific, and sets out, with no ambiguity this time round, the forces that, for the literary imagination, rule the world. As another character in *The Princess Casamassima* puts it:

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> The figures on the chessboard were still the passions and jealousies and superstitions and stupidities of man, and thus positioned with regard to each other at any given moment could be of interest only to the grim invisible fates who played the game—who sat, through the ages, bow-backed over the table.

Well, perhaps no salesman can expect utter satisfaction. Better to close the deal and move on to the next customer. I think that with perhaps a third of these students I got across what it meant for Henry James to be "the historian of fine consciences" that Joseph Conrad called him. Maybe, too, at the end of our nine weeks together reading this one writer, several of these students would depart with a glimmer of what James himself meant when he said that "It is art that *makes* life, makes interest, makes importance, for our consideration and application of these things, and I know of no substitute whatever for the force and beauty of its process." At the end of the course, they wrote those generous student evaluations. The two sets of examinations they wrote for me were strong, with an occasional James-like formulation popping up in them. "James's endings," wrote one student, "seem often to be the twist of the knife rather than the actual stab." "In this story, as in so much of James," wrote another, "the victories are small, and often so much more valuable because of it."

What sticks? Will there be a residue? What remains? Will any of these students eventually join the narrator of James's story "The Next Time," who remarks of the select band of readers devoted to high literary culture, "We're a numerous band, partakers of the same repose, who sit together in the shade of the tree, by the plash of the fountain, with the glare of the desert round us and no great vice that I know of but the habit perhaps of estimating people a little too much by what they think of a certain style"? These are questions the answer to which a teacher of Henry James wishes to but cannot know. Still, the prospect of having possibly put two or three more Jamesians in the world, from the standpoint of a high-pressure, hard-sell literary salesman, makes all those mornings talking one's head off seem, just possibly, worth it.

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Katherine Anne Porter and the uses of fiction

by Donna Rifkind

She was born, as she liked to tell people, Katherine Anne Maria Veronica Callista Russell Porter, in a log cabin in Indian Creek, Texas. She said her ancestors included Daniel Boone, and she claimed as distinguished relatives both Cole Porter and O. Henry (William Sydney Porter). Often giving the year of her birth as 1894, "the latest possible date on which I could possibly have been born," she told Enrique Hank Lopez in *Conversations with Katherine Anne Porter* (1981) that her mother died six weeks after her birth, from complications following the delivery. She let on that she was raised a Catholic, that she had eloped as a young girl from a convent in San Antonio—sometimes she said New Orleans—to marry a rich older man.

A captivating story of one writer's beginnings, one might think, and wonderful material for biographers; yet scarcely a word of it is true. In fact she was born Callie Russell Porter, after a childhood friend of her mother's, on May 15, 1890. Her mother died nearly two years later, shortly after the birth of a younger sister named Mary Alice. The four Porter children were raised by their stern but loving grandmother, Catherine Anne Skaggs Porter, whose name young Callie appropriated, and by their weak-willed, inattentive father. The family were Methodists, scraping out a living on a dirt farm in Kyle, Texas. They were related to Daniel Boone only very distantly, through Boone's nephew Jonathan, and bore no relation whatsoever either to Cole Porter or O. Henry. Katherine Anne Porter borrowed the romantic convent-school story from the history of an aunt, Ione Funchess Porter, and when she married at sixteen in a conventional Methodist ceremony it was to a twenty-year-old railway clerk named John Henry Koontz, in Angelina County, Texas.

The long, eventful life of Katherine Anne Porter—she died on September 18, 1980, just past her ninetieth birthday—was an exercise in reinvention on a scale of which these details give only the slightest hint. The reasons for her love of transforming the facts are complex and fascinating. At its best, her urge to reinvent resulted in some of the finest short fiction written in her time; at its worst, it caused harm to more than one close friend and a number of relatives. When in her later years Porter brought about her most successful self-transformation—into a cultural icon—her stories about herself, freely offered to anyone who cared to listen, in their tangle of memory and rich invention took on something of the quality of myth.

Katherine Anne Porter's fiction emerged from this same web of memory and imagination. Some twenty short stories, a few of which Porter called short novels, are the crown of her oeuvre; they were published in three volumes entitled *Flowering Judas and Other Stories* (1930), *Pale Horse, Pale Rider* (1939), and *The Leaning Tower and Other Stories* (1944). In 1966, all the short fiction

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was gathered in one volume, *The Collected Stories of Katherine Anne Porter*. While two of her best stories, "Old Mortality" and "Noon Wine," were each written in just seven days, Porter's only novel, the best-selling *Ship of Fools* (1962), took her twenty years to write and is generally considered to be her weakest work. In addition to the fiction, she published a volume of essays, *The Days Before* (1952), which was then incorporated into a larger book, *The Collected Essays and Occasional Writings of Katherine Anne Porter*, in 1970. This contains, among other things, eleven chapters of a never-completed biography of Cotton Mather. Finally, in 1976 there appeared a tiny volume called *The Never-Ending Wrong*, which is a longish essay about the trial of Sacco and Vanzetti.

Less than two dozen stories and one painfully wrought novel—it is a meager yield for a woman who is considered a major twentieth-century fiction writer. Even so, many authors, including Eudora Welty, Kay Boyle, and Flannery O'Connor, claimed to be influenced by her. V.S. Pritchett wrote in *The New Statesman* that she is "an important writer in the [short-story] genre because she solves the essential problem: how to satisfy exhaustively in writing briefly"; and Edmund Wilson wrote that "she writes English of a purity and precision almost unique in contemporary fiction."

Porter herself was acutely aware of how modest the fruits of her career appeared, but there were all kinds of distractions, both self-imposed and external, that were said to conspire against her. Over and over she complained of the things that got in the way of writing: unhappy relationships with men, the lack of a permanent home or adequate finances, an unspecific yet crippling despair. "[T]he fact remains that I have muffed on the grand scale the whole material question of living," she wrote to the novelist Glenway Wescott in 1943. Through the years she tended increasingly to divert her energies away from writing and into social obligations, into endlessly animated literary conversation ("the two talkingest women I ever met" was how Malcolm Cowley described Porter and the writer Josephine Herbst) and long, artful letters.

On the occasion of Porter's centenary, a selection of Porter's letters, edited by her friend Isabel Bayley, has now been published.[1] While Mrs. Bayley's is a large volume, the book contains only a portion of the thousands of letters Porter wrote. Isabel Bayley chose to include "those that would carry the story of her major working years, 1930 to 1963," which means that the collection begins when Porter is already forty years old and ends when she is seventy-three. There is nothing here about Porter's escape at age twenty-three from Texas, from her family, and from her disastrous first marriage; nothing about her failed second marriage to the aspiring painter Ernest Stock; nothing about her early, always halfhearted forays into radicalism; and nothing about the fifteen or so years at the end of her active life, which she spent in Washington as a splendidly entrenched grande dame.

And yet, truncated as this version of a lifetime of correspondence is, even if Isabel Bayley had decided to include all of Porter's life in her time frame the letters would still be a very far cry from the "autobiography in a very pure sense" that Porter told the novelist J. F. Powers they were. For there is a good bit of exaggeration and evasion in this carefully selected fraction of the correspondence—exaggerations and evasions that often make the facts very difficult to discern. As Porter's biographer, Joan Givner, has written, [2] "when she was desperately unhappy her letters sometimes became fictional exercises in which she described life not as it was but as it should have been, a deep-rooted habit that she had carried over from childhood."

And Porter was often desperately unhappy. One of the most striking aspects of the new collection is the recurring note of despair that runs throughout her corre-

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1 *Letters of Katherine Anne Porter*, selected and edited and with an introduction by Isabel Bayley; Atlantic Monthly Press, 642 pages, $29.95.

2 *Katherine Anne Porter: A Life*, by Joan Givner, was published by Simon & Schuster in 1982.

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spondence; sometimes it takes the tone of mere complaining, but more often it comes across as deep-seated, unshakable depression. In Mexico in 1931, living in the same house as Eugene Pressly, the man who would become her third husband two years later, she writes to Josephine Herbst wondering "whether I shan't be forced in the end to live by myself because that is maybe the only way I can live permanently." "I have a deep, incurable (apparently) painful melancholy, night and day," she goes on; "And I know there is no getting rid of any part of oneself. I have to learn to live with me, which is a tough job."

But Mexico was not all sorrow and leaden-eyed despair; it was, after all, the place to which Porter had come for the first time as a young woman back in 1920, with a Roaring Twenties sense of adventure and independence, for "the express purpose of attending a Revolution." Porter meant the word "attending" here to be ironic, and she repeated the phrase more than once, in an essay entitled "St. Augustine and the Bullfight" (1955) and in a *Paris Review* interview in 1963. But it turned out to be exactly the right word. Porter attended the Mexican Revolution very much as a tourist might attend a bullfight, titillated by the danger yet feeling herself exempt from it, and she used this point of view altogether successfully in two stories, "Flowering Judas" and "Hacienda."

Both Laura in "Flowering Judas" and the unnamed narrator in "Hacienda" are American women traveling in Mexico as canny observers. Both get mixed up peripherally in a dramatic experience—one unwittingly causes a young man's death, the other becomes involved in the surreal filming of a movie—yet both emerge from their situations not only unharmed but still relatively detached. The narrator notes in "Hacienda" that in Mexico "strangers feel the acid of death in their bones whether or not any real danger is near them." As Porter was well aware, her Mexico was a place where she could feel that tingly "acid of death," yet where she would never have to suffer any actual harm.

For all her irony about her tourist status, though, Porter's understanding of the politics involved in the revolutionary Mexico of this time was at best simplistic, at worst dangerously naïve. Nonetheless, hers was a political philosophy—if one can call it that—to which she would adhere until her death, consisting primarily of the belief that any given political system, whether Mexican, European, or American, is controlled by a cabal of men from whose corruption everybody suffers; and, furthermore, that every citizen who does nothing in the face of this corruption is guilty of collusion. So in 1931, while in Mexico for the second time, she wrote to the critic Kenneth Burke: "every smallest step taken towards economic readjustment, or even mere alleviation of present suffering, degenerates at once into a little combine of grafters and careerists who collect money to finance the project, advertise it extensively, and so fatten—but the readjustment and alleviation somehow mysteriously fail to come. It is maddening to see."

Except for random observations like this, Porter did not concern herself much with Mexican politics. For her Mexico City was chiefly an inexpensive, sunny, pleasant place in which to write. With Pressly and another friend, Mary Doherty, she shared "an immense, rambling country-kind of house" there, with all the balconies "blooming with the merry little domestic Mexican plants . . . . it is all very clean and sweet and quiet. The rent is forty dollars American a month."

It was to this house that the poet Hart Crane came, in April of 1931, for an extended visit; he spent his days there in sodden drunkenness and his nights attempting to procure Mexican boys. At first Porter was delighted with Crane's wild-eyed enthusiasm, watching as he ran around the estate "roaring fragments of Blake, Christopher Marlowe and Hart Crane," but she soon tired of his constant scene-making and finally threw him out. Her letter to him afterward is severe: "I think it is time you grew up and stopped behaving like a very degenerate adolescent . . . . Your emotional hysteria is not impressive, except possibly to those little hangers-on of literature who feel your tantrums are a mark of genius . . . . Let me alone.

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This disgusting episode has gone too far." In 1932, after Crane had jumped to his death from a ship bound for New York, Porter did not repent for her harshness. Crane's behavior was "foul and outrageous," she wrote to Mary Doherty, "and as for me, his suicide has not changed the thing that happened."

This incident, recounted at the beginning of the correspondence, establishes Porter's ever-ready determination to defend herself, an attitude that is present throughout all the letters. Of her difficulties with Hart Crane, she writes characteristically to Mary Doherty at one point in a Blanche DuBois-like fit of self-justification: ". . . it would not have been unpardonable if he had not turned so insanely on me, with such a bestial assurance of insolence, insulting me in my own house..."

Porter liked the idea of herself as a beleaguered heroine, and her pose of against-all-odds bravado, together with a mask of Southern female vulnerability, could be deadly effective. Then, too, there was the fact of her commanding beauty, of a kind that lasted well into old age and that compelled a long line of both homosexual and heterosexual men to idolize her. All these characteristics made her an extremely forceful personality.

Though she may have seemed powerful to others, in her heart Porter was driven by a sense of failure. Typically, after a long period spent unsuccessfully trying to write, she would pick up and move, hoping for inspiration elsewhere. After leaving Mexico for Berlin in August of 1931 (on the ocean journey that was to provide the setting for *Ship of Fools*), Porter lived for a while in Berlin and then in Paris, where she and Eugene Pressly were married. She loved Paris's literary social scene, and she solidified friendships there with Ford Madox Ford, Monroe Wheeler, Glenway Wescott, and Barbara Harrison, who would later marry Wescott's brother and who would become Porter's patroness. In the meantime her work was appearing in *The Virginia Quarterly Review* and *The Hound & Horn*, which published part of her biography-in-progress on Cotton Mather.

With the political situation in Europe she seemed, like many people at the time, to be almost blissfully uninvolved. Though she had met Hermann Goering briefly in Berlin, at this critical period she did not appear to grasp the seriousness of the Nazi threat. "The news from Austria is not very pretty," she writes to Barbara Harrison in July of 1934 with what in retrospect may seem a dispassionate attitude; "It can't be very cheering-up to have to run for your life because you aren't an Aryan." In the midst of the gravest catastrophe of the twentieth century, one of her main apprehensions is that the Salzburg Festival, which she enjoys immensely, will be discontinued. "I know that all sorts of terrible things have happened and will happen," she writes in the same letter, "[but] it is quite plain nothing much can be done about it, so I can only hope that, if the Salzburg Festival must go, it won't at least go this year!" In 1936, with a blithe understatement that is easy to interpret as incomprehension, she tells the novelist James Stern that "we were glad you had left Madrid before the civil war started, it must be a depressing spectacle there now."

From Europe, at the end of 1936, Porter went to live in Doylestown, Pennsylvania, where she did a good deal of writing, and then to New York. While she had written to Barbara Harrison Wescott that "It IS important, being really married," she was now, in 1937, separated from Pressly, though the two were not divorced until the following year. Immediately after the divorce she married Albert Erskine, a business manager for *The Southern Review* who was more than twenty years her junior. Erskine was shocked on the day of the wedding to learn that Porter was nearly fifty years old; he apparently never recovered, and the marriage, which had been a bad idea from the start, fell apart by 1940. "Marriage for me has meant pure disaster, a strange cruel starvation of the heart," Porter wrote to Erskine from the Yaddo artists' colony in 1941, perhaps by way of apology. She would not marry again.

Porter tracked the events in Europe following the fall of Paris from the serene refuge of

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Yaddo in Saratoga Springs, New York. Her letters during the war show a cautious patriotism, but at the same time her favorite themes of political corruption and collusion appear vaguely to contradict her loyalty: "There are a great number of things wrong in this country, and it is the fault of all of us: if we don't while we are still able, fight the things we know are damning this place, then we are really in guilty complicity with them."

When her nephew Paul is drafted into the army, however, Porter reaffirms her belief in the democratic ideals of the United States, and writes to Freda Kirchwey, then editor of *The Nation*, that "I am anti-Fascist . . . . I am anti-Nazi . . . . But this does not make me a Communist, nor a sympathizer with either faction. I am anti-Stalinist, as well as anti-Trotskyite." Yet Porter was far from consistent in her politics. At the end of the Forties, when Ezra Pound was awarded the first Bollingen Prize for Poetry, Porter spoke out in his favor when a storm of protest erupted over the poet's fascist activities during the war; and throughout her life Porter maintained a mixed-up Southern-elite attitude that was directly at odds with her championship of democracy. In the letter to Freda Kirchwey, who was a pillar of left-wing orthodoxy, she writes: "I confess I am wearied out a little with the noisy minorities who keep up such a continual clamor about their wrongs [that] they manage to drown out the voices of those millions of equally good, equally important, from any human point of view, and equally suffering people whose only crime is, they have no political axes to grind and were not clever enough to join with some political faction."

Porter was talking about Jews and Trotskyites specifically, "noisy minorities" whom she seemed to connect somehow with "known spies and agents" who, she believed, had infiltrated "our own state department and business firms." "What I am most interested in is a clean-up in the State Department," she continues, to investigate "the *root* of the evil."

Between the lines of Porter's complaints about Jews and Trotskyites was a criticism of the intellectuals involved with *Partisan Review* at the beginning of the war. Largely Trotskyite and mostly Jewish, this group took a strong stand against the United States entering the war on the Allied side, using the Trotskyite argument that equated Hitler's fascism with America's capitalism. Porter's rallying cry for patriotism at this time, then, gave her an opportunity to get in some digs at her intellectual rivals at *Partisan Review*. But what makes her complaints rather silly is the fact that the State Department at that time, while full of Stalinist sympathizers, was not allowing any Trotskyites to "infiltrate" it at all.

Joan Givner tries to explain Porter's scattershot political opinions by pointing out that "all her life Porter wavered in her class identification, now agitating on behalf of downtrodden, exploited people, now speaking proudly of belonging to a slave-owning, aristocratic class." Indeed Porter loved the image of herself as "the grandchild of a lost war," as she put it, with Southern-aristocratic rights and privileges that had been denied her since the beginning of her life in that log cabin at Indian Creek. Included in this image was that idea of herself as a lone battle-scarred survivor fighting some vague, overwhelming system that threatened to engulf her. So dear to her was this self-conception that, in going out of her way to hurt someone close to her, she would somehow conclude that she had acted not out of malice but in self-defense.

In 1942, Porter went to Reno to get a divorce from Albert Erskine. It was here that she gave an interview to the FBI in which she told an almost entirely fabricated story about her old friend Josephine Herbst.[3] In the correspondence she mentions the episode only twice. On the first occasion, from Reno, she writes to her friend, the editor and biographer Donald Elder:

3 For a full account of this episode, see Elinor Langer's biography, *Josephine Herbst: The Story She Could Never Tell* (Little, Brown, 1983), and Miss Langer's essay entitled "The Measuring Stick (Katherine Anne Porter and the FBI)" in the Summer 1984 issue of *Grand Street*.

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> The FBI finally tracked me down to ask questions about friends. I was really happy to be able to tell them that so far as I knew they had no political consciousness whatever . . . . as you said once about this very thing, it is surprising to find how little one does know about the actual life of one's friends. What do they do all those long times when I don't see them? Where are they? What goes on in their heads?

Although, as Herbst's biographer Elinor Langer has written, it is still not possible today fully to understand Herbst's situation at the time the FBI was investigating her, it seems that she was dismissed from a government position in Washington (with the Office of the Coordinator of Information, or OCI), shortly after she went to work there in 1942. Herbst had been given a position on the German desk, where she was to prepare radio scripts for daily transmissions in German.

The FBI's investigation was routine enough, undertaken because Herbst was handling confidential information at a crucial period during World War II. It was common enough knowledge, too, that Herbst had been an ardent Stalinist in the Thirties, though she never actually joined the Communist Party (her husband, John Hermann, was an active member of the Party, working to organize farmers against New Deal policies). And she was a vocal opponent of the U.S. position on Germany during the time she took the OCI job, believing that her government superiors ought to appeal to the German Left who opposed Hitler. (Whether in fact there was any German Left at the time is a matter open to question.) The FBI talked to many people about Herbst; Miss Langer was able to obtain Porter's testimony, which was buried for years in FBI files, under the Freedom of Information Act.

Porter and Herbst had been close friends since the early 1920s. Theirs was a friendship based on mutual appreciation for each other's artistic ambitions and talent; they praised each other's books in a frequent and lively correspondence, and Porter reviewed Herbst's first novel, *Nothing Is Sacred* (1928), glowingly. By the Forties, however, Porter was less delighted with her friend's work, and was growing less enchanted also with her behavior in general. Though they did not quarrel, there was tension between them, and the correspondence began to drop off.

If Porter was wondering about Herbst's "actual life" during the time she wrote to Donald Elder, she seems to have felt confident that she could supply some of the facts of that life herself—through a bit of invention. She told the FBI that Herbst had acted as a courier for the Soviets, transmitting a "secret message" from Moscow to Louis Aragon, the French Communist leader, in Paris in 1935, on the date of the funeral of the writer Henri Barbusse. (Coincidentally, Porter and Herbst had both been in Paris in 1935, and, according to Elinor Langer, Herbst did attend Barbusse's "immense" funeral, which the French Communist Party turned into a major political event.) Among other things, Porter also stated that Herbst "has a violent temper, a revolutionist attitude, and has caused trouble wherever the opportunity presented itself. . . She is said to be a great follower of STALIN and a personal admirer of this man."

Although Herbst was indeed a great admirer of Stalin, and did attend Barbusse's funeral, Elinor Langer writes that "even the FBI appears to have found Katherine Anne Porter's fiction farfetched," and that "there is no way—there is absolutely no way—[Herbst] could have been traveling as a courier to and from Moscow. The times and places simply do not add up. Josie did not go to the Soviet Union in 1935." (Herbst had, however, traveled there with John Hermann in 1930, to attend the International Congress of Revolutionary Writers in Kharkov.) Miss Langer continues: "Katherine Anne's story is purely and simply a malevolent reinterpretation of everything she knew about Josie's history almost from the time they had met, and if destruction was her purpose it was also a particularly clever interpretation since it left Katherine Anne herself the only person in a position to prove or disprove what she said."

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Herbst never found out about Porter's testimony, and it cannot be said to be the reason Herbst was eventually fired from the OCI. Yet what Porter said about her friend reveals a dangerously festering hostility toward Herbst which she dared not express to her former friend directly.

Porter's testimony is certainly a far cry from her claim in her letter to Donald Elder that Herbst had "no political consciousness whatever"; she went even further in this outrageous reinvention years later, in 1960, when she wrote to her literary agent Cyrilly Abels:

> Once years ago an FBI man called on me to ask me about a friend of mine suspected of Communism (it was during one of those flurries) and now, would you believe it? I had known this friend for years, we had spent our leisure time together just talking about everything, one might have said . . . . and I should have said we pretty well knew everything worth knowing about each other. I was floored when this agent looked upon her as a seriously subversive and conspiratorial character. I was happy to tell him the entire truth, that I had never dreamed of such a thing, that so far as I had ever known she had no politics at all, Right, Left or Center. He looked dissatisfied but went away. And quite years later I learned that she was a Communist, and had been all along, and had got a good government job and was busy gnawing away in the woodwork; can you imagine?

What could have prompted Porter to tell such outrageous lies about Josephine Herbst? Elinor Langer makes the case that the two had quarreled at Yaddo a year earlier about preferred treatment there, and that there was tension between them because Porter had promised and then failed to review Herbst's novel *Satan's Sergeants*; she speculates also that Porter may simply have been bored out there in Reno, waiting for her divorce to come through. Interestingly, it was not even at this time that Porter's once-intimate friendship with Herbst fell apart for good; it would end in 1948, over a dispute about Porter's attack on Gertrude Stein which appeared in 1947 in *Harper's* magazine. Herbst made the quarrel public by publishing an "open letter" defending Stein in *Partisan Review*. Porter never forgave her.

Miss Langer's arguments that Porter was simply feeling bored, unhappy, and ill-tempered in Reno when she talked to the FBI, that perhaps the investigation made Porter feel useful and important at one of the most insecure times of her life, doesn't take us very far in understanding Porter's behavior in this episode. For one thing, it is hard to believe that anyone could threaten Porter's sovereignty at Yaddo; she was more or less unequivocally recognized there as a queen bee. And simple boredom does not really account for the oblique ferocity of Porter's behavior. For a more believable explanation, we are left with the possibility that Porter's objections to Herbst's politics were strong enough to foster this underhanded attack. But there is a second possibility, one for which there is scant evidence but which remains compelling because, if true, it might shed some light not only on Porter's reasons for giving damaging testimony to the FBI about Herbst, but also on the whole dissolution of their long-standing friendship.

Josephine Herbst had the tendency to fall romantically in love with her best women friends, especially those with artistic natures. A few times, these attachments led to full-blown affairs. Porter, on the other hand, had an acute horror of lesbians, reacting with near hysteria at Yaddo when, in 1940, the young novelist Carson McCullers developed a worshipping crush on her. It would not be altogether farfetched to guess that, sometime before 1942, Herbst had propositioned her friend and had been rebuffed, with disastrous results.

Elinor Langer conjectures as much when she chronicles the time in 1935 when Herbst, after her marriage to John Hermann had ended, visited Porter in Paris. Langer writes: "[Herbst] was tormented with loneliness, filled with sexual suffering. . . . Once she must even have dropped a hint to Katherine Anne that a little physical comfort would do a body no harm, a hint not taken and never

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referred to again, though in Katherine Anne it rankled, she confessed it to Gene [her husband at the time], and it made another edge between them [i.e., Herbst and Porter] . . ." It may not be coincidental, either, that the final break between the two women was caused by Herbst's defense of Gertrude Stein, perhaps the most unabashedly famous lesbian of the twentieth century.

Whether the objection was to Herbst's homosexual tendencies or to her politics, clearly there were complex psychological forces at work in Porter that caused her to want to hurt her friend. The desire to cause pain was indirect, of course; Porter herself did not seem to acknowledge it openly. But the very underhandedness of Porter's fiction-spinning to the FBI makes her behavior seem more than malicious—it seems nearly pathological. She once wrote: "Chaos *is*—we are in it. My business is to give a little shape and meaning to my share of it." That the shape and meaning she gave to the FBI did not in any way correspond to Josephine Herbst's reality, and that it was intended to cause real harm, did not seem to trouble Porter particularly.

It is important to keep in mind that out of the same need to reshape memory, this same mania for order, came some stunning short fiction. As we expect of all good fiction, Porter's stories, in their very fictiveness, often ended up telling a more profound kind of truth. Porter knew this. In a letter to Caroline Gordon explaining her creative process while in the middle of writing a story based on one of her relatives, she admits: "I am not looking up any facts, nor consulting with any one, nor going back to check my sources—*nothing*, I depend precisely on what I know in my blood, and in my memory, and on something that is *deeper than knowledge*." And in 1956, to Eudora Welty, she writes similarly: ". . . the real difficulty is explaining how, by the organic process of creation, the scattered and seemingly random events remembered through many years become fiction, that is—not a lie, really as I think you call it—but symbolic truth." The correlation between this "symbolic truth" and pure invention can be illuminated by looking at an episode each in two stories, "Old Mortality" (my favorite of Porter's works) and "Noon Wine."

"Old Mortality" is a nostalgia-infused portrait of the family life of Miranda, a character who appears in several stories including "Pale Horse, Pale Rider." The first part of "Old Mortality" is concerned with the tales Miranda hears in her childhood about her family; some seem magically unreal, some are ordinary, and some continue to unfold as she observes them.

In one scene, Miranda observes her cousin, Molly Parrington, an aging flirt who belongs to her grandmother's generation. Cousin Molly is "an unnatural mother to her ugly daughter Eva, an old maid past forty while her mother was still the belle of the ball." Molly can look an old beau straight in the eye and claim that Eva was born when she was only fifteen, all the while "both of them remembering that he had been best man at her wedding when she was past twenty-one."

Everyone in this scene—the old beau, the ugly daughter, watchful Miranda, and especially Molly herself—knows how outrageously Molly is lying; yet in her utter nerve, in that look straight in the eye, she is displaying a greater truth about the strength of her vanity, her charm, her power: Molly is daring everyone in the room to call her bluff and back out of the conspiracy into which she has drawn them with her lie. Cousin Molly can, of course, be understood to be a portrait of Porter, who was forty-six when she wrote the story and who was known to use the very same gambit—more and more frequently as she grew older—of daring others to go along with the inventions that she created about her life. But a case could certainly be made that there are elements of Porter in the character of Miranda as well: her observant eye, her aesthetic sensitivity, her wishful nostalgia.

The other example that shows how Porter used the theme of lying to reveal "symbolic truth" comes from the end of one of her most-anthologized and best-known stories,

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"Noon Wine." The setting is a small farm in South Texas at the turn of the century, very much like the one on which Porter was raised. The owner of the farm, Mr. Thompson, employs a hired hand, a silent, gruff Swede named Mr. Helton. A bounty hunter, a man named Hatch, comes looking for Mr. Helton, claiming that the Swede is an escaped lunatic. Mr. Thompson quickly develops a dislike for Hatch; when Hatch makes a move to capture Helton, Mr. Thompson kills the bounty hunter with an axe.

Mr. Thompson is cleared of murder charges after testifying that he killed Hatch in order to save Helton's life. Yet both Thompson and his wife know that he could just as easily have turned the troublemaker over to the sheriff and been done with it, but that he killed Hatch out of simple, sheer hatred. This knowledge impels Mr. Thompson to go around town with his wife after the murder, calling on neighbors and telling his lie again and again, looking for absolution but seeing in all his neighbors' eyes that, though they are willing to go along with the judge's decision, they don't believe that Mr. Thompson acted out of anything but a maliciously murderous intent. Finally, having convinced no one of his innocence, Mr. Thompson kills himself, leaving a suicide note that repeats the lie, for the last time.

What is the significance of Mr. Thompson's tragedy? There does not appear to be any deeper "symbolic truth" in his lie—it is just a lie, and he and everybody else know it. I would suggest that his predicament is the dark side of Cousin Molly Parrington's rather more lighthearted fibbing: though you might go around insisting you are telling the truth, in your heart you know you are not, and in your heart you have to live with the consequences of that fact. It was a fact Mr. Thompson eventually could not live with; yet it was one that Katherine Anne Porter not only managed to live with but that proved to be her salvation.

Porter managed to fuse dim memory and vivid imagination successfully in story after story, nearly always presenting characters "in the round, a true portrait of a human being, with *illumination*," which, as she wrote to her nephew Paul, was the way she thought the best writers worked. Anyone who reads "The Jilting of Granny Weatherall" or "Pale Horse, Pale Rider" (or any of the other Miranda tales) can see how vividly Porter achieved this sense of illumination. The one effort in which she seriously failed to satisfy the aesthetic challenges she set for herself was her novel, *Ship of Fools*, which ironically brought her a level of fame she never would have achieved with her short fiction alone.

The novel is set on a German freighter-passenger ship that embarks from Veracruz, Mexico, and is bound for Bremerhaven. The year is 1931, the eve of the European devastation, and if ever a book could be said to suffer from excessive hindsight, this one does, with its leaden ironies, its sudden portents, its shipwrecked metaphors. Omens and forebodings abound—omens which Porter never recognized herself when she was in Europe at the time in which the book is set. Yet, for all the book's constant promise of sweeping violence, very little happens aboard this ship except for one "shabby little incident" after another, as one character, an American divorcée named Mary Treadwell, puts it. All the developments in the book, in the end, are arrested when the S.S. *Vera* finally docks at Bremerhaven.

What are these "shabby little incidents"? A German man named Freytag, wrongly accused of being Jewish, is banished to a lonely table in the dining room occupied by an outcast Jew named Löwenthal and a hunchback. Two children of Spanish zarzuela dancers throw a German couple's pet bulldog overboard; a poor Basque animal carver from the steerage deck jumps in to save the dog and is drowned. Two young American painters, Jenny Brown and David Scott, indulge in a tiresome ongoing lovers' quarrel. The ship's doctor, named Schumann, flirts with an aging Spanish noblewoman known as La Condesa who is being deported from Cuba for revolutionary activities. In a climactic scene, after the ship's final festive dinner, the drunken Mrs. Treadwell attacks an equally

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drunken American man, William Denny, with the heel of her gold sandal.

More remarkable, however, is what fails to happen on the ship. The 876 "souls" on the steerage deck, poor Spaniards being deported from Cuba after the failure of the sugar market, never rise up in revolt, in spite of Porter's frequent rumbling hints that they might do so at any time; nobody harms the unpleasant Jew, Herr Löwenthal, though many of the characters slander him behind his back, and the sea air is heavy with ominous references to the purity of the German race and to putting people in gas ovens; the vaguely malevolent zarzuela dancers, whom everyone distrusts, fail to provide any true threat at all.

What really sinks *Ship of Fools*, though, aside from its numbing series of anticlimaxes, is Porter's antipathy for her characters. She seems eager to make each personality in the book a representative of some deep truth about mankind in general—the Germans as racists, the Americans as shallow, morally empty boors, the steerage "souls" as downtrodden masses ripe for revolution. This is difficult enough to carry off, but then Porter stacks the odds even further against her success by neglecting to conceal the contempt she feels for each of the characters on the ship. They really are all fools, in her mind: Herr Löwenthal the Jew, for one, is painted as a narrow-minded and nasty creature, perhaps even deserving of the bigotry the other characters direct toward him. None of the characters grow or change by the book's end, nor does Porter's attitude toward any of them soften.

Ship of Fools is both too ambitious and not nearly ambitious enough. The novel suffers from too much imposed order, too much obvious design. It bears every stress mark of the twenty years Porter spent writing it (she often referred to it as her "hellish" novel), and one finishes it with the same sense of strained relief that Porter must have felt when she was finally released from the burden of it.

Why, then, was the novel a million-dollar best seller? By the time of the book's publication in April 1962, Porter was such a well-known public figure—she had been lecturing and speaking around the country extensively, receiving many honorary degrees and appearing on television—that when the long-awaited novel at last appeared it might have contained only her laundry lists and still have caused a sensation. Not even a series of justifiably negative reviews, most notably Theodore Solotaroff's in *Commentary*, could manage to undermine the enormous popularity of Porter's only novel. (As an epilogue to the Josephine Herbst episode, it is worth mentioning that Herbst herself wrote a scathing review of Porter's novel which was commissioned by *Commentary* but dropped in favor of Solotaroff's essay, with whose assessment Herbst thoroughly agreed. Herbst did, however, read her review over the radio station WBAI in New York.)

Ship of Fools made Porter a glittering literary star, and, for the first time in her life, a wealthy woman. In 1966, when her *Collected Stories* was published, she won both a National Book Award and a Pulitzer Prize, was elected to the American Academy of Arts and Letters, and received a Gold Medal for fiction from the National Institute of Arts and Letters. She had once written to her sister Gay that all she ever wanted was glory. She had it now, after a lifetime of insecurity. She writes gloatingly to J. F. Powers: "I wish you not only survival but survival with triumph, and the appreciation that you should have. Don't let anybody tell you that glory is not glorious and an honorable aim for an honorable artist or any other honest man of gifts and feelings."

Yet, in many ways, the personal glory Porter seemed to have garnered for herself was only an invention, as fictional as the stories that had brought her fame. One of the first things she did after *Ship* became a best-seller was to buy herself an enormous emerald ring, which she talked about incessantly to everyone she knew; it was as if she were trying to convince herself that she was indeed worthy of such a prize. In truth she was still feeling as beleaguered as she had in her

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leanest days, complaining about being "surrounded by vampire bats who do not go without their dram of my life-stream," and lamenting to Powers in another letter, from Paris, that

> I couldn't be more utterly homeless and dispossessed if I had been thrown out on my ear and my household gear confiscated. For I do not own a foot of land or a roof anywhere . . . . It is just true that nothing in this world matters one single damn except to get your work done . . . . I suffered for years literally from hunger and cold and every medical neglect, and it does not do any good. My only excuse is that I did not know how to make a living and learn to be an artist too.

Leaving aside the exaggerated cadences of Blanche DuBois or Scarlett O'Hara, that wounded Southern heroine figure that Porter loved to play, there is much in this passage that is unquestionably true. Isabel Bayley's collection offers many clear indications of the sheer unending drudgery of most of Porter's career: the grim loneliness and uncertain money; the exhausting cross-country travel, when she was no longer young, to give speeches and lectures for extra cash; the lack of a permanent home or a permanent husband or children. In no way was it an easy thing to be Katherine Anne Porter, and if this does not excuse her often malignant behavior toward others, it does make it easier to understand why she complained so much, and why she tended so often to reinvent the truth.

Porter was right when she admitted that she did not know how to make a living and learn to be an artist as well. For the most part, until the end, she sacrificed the way she lived in favor of her art. Elinor Langer has said of her that she is "alternately a slow and an inspired writer, her stories forged mysteriously, even to her. She would never do in a literary realm what she would do socially: as a writer her integrity is absolute." After reading a great deal both about and by Porter, I find myself in agreement, at least as far as the short fiction is concerned. This difficult, complex woman, who needed constantly to reshape any reality she did not like, who was an often frustrated artist and a frequent disappointment as a friend, was surely no hero. But she was an artist. As she said herself, all that matters to the world of art, after the messiness of her life has ended, is that she got her work done.

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Maurice Prendergast at the Whitney

by Richard J. Wattenmaker

"Maurice Prendergast" is the fifth exhibition of the artist's work to have been presented at the Whitney Museum of American Art in fifty-six years. Organized by the Williams College Museum of Art, this traveling show comprises sixty-eight watercolors, forty-eight oils, and nineteen monotypes, with alternates among the 129 catalogue entries shown at the four participating museums.[1] The catalogue[2] has been written by Nancy Mowll Mathews, Prendergast Curator at Williams, on the basis of research by the team of scholars working since 1983 on the Maurice and Charles Prendergast Systematic Catalogue Project, which has published a *catalogue raisonné* of the brothers' work.[3]

The Whitney galleries, with their drab and temporary atmosphere, were reminiscent of the dismal environment in which the museum interred Demuth three years ago. Compared with the intimate setting created for Vuillard at the Brooklyn Museum, or how MOMA welcomed Matisse, the pictures looked warehoused, rather than thoughtfully installed. The labels provided no identification of the pristine frames created for those very works by Charles, always one of the enchanting grace notes of any Prendergast show. Concurrently, the Metropolitan devoted a gallery to a display of American frames, including one by Charles, and MOMA offered an explanatory panel on the gray moldings Matisse specified for his Moroccan canvases. (It was Matisse himself who, among all the American artists he saw during his visits here, most admired Prendergast's work.) But refinements such as these were of no concern to the Whitney overseers, for whom the Prendergast visit seemed more an intrusion than a long-anticipated homecoming.

In a self-congratulatory catalogue foreword, Linda Shearer, Director of the Williams College Museum of Art, declares: ". . . it is with pride and celebration that WCMA presents this first definitive retrospective exhibition of Maurice Prendergast's work." Neither the first, nor "definitive" by any standard, the show has a veritable ancestral Jesse Tree. What could engender the dismissal of the cumulative efforts of museums, dealers, critics, curators, and educators who, during the sixty-six years since Prendergast's death in 1924, have assembled shows and written on various aspects of the artist? The organiz-

1 "Maurice Prendergast" was on view at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, from May 31 through September 2, 1990. It will travel to the Williams College Museum of Art, Williamstown, Massachusetts (October 6-December 16, 1990), the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (February 21-April 22, 1991), and the Phillips Collection, Washington, D.C. (May 18-August 25, 1991).

2 *Maurice Prendergast*, by Nancy Mowll Mathews; Prestel-Verlag/Williams College Museum of Art, 193 pages, $50; $30 paper.

3 *Maurice Brazil Prendergast, Charles Prendergast: A Catalogue Raisonné*, by Carol Clark, Nancy Mowll Mathews, and Gwendolyn Owens; Prestel-Verlag/Williams College Museum of Art, 812 pages, $275.

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ers, whose endeavor rests so heavily upon what others have done and dwells on the factual minutiae of long-forgotten turn-of-the-century exhibitions and their attendant newspaper notices, data painstakingly mined and published throughout the years by many scholars, have simply chosen to disregard the vessels in which much of this material has been offered.

Maurice Prendergast's contributions earned him a worthy place in the history of modern art. Out of the transient scenes of everyday life that constituted his primary repertoire of motifs, he created an abundant legacy. Prendergast expressed his joyous response to humanity with a breadth of observation firmly rooted in concrete reality, with no narrative overlay, no deflection into the realm of the sentimental; he was never interested in the unadventurous illustrative naturalism that confined the Impressionism of so many Americans at the end of the last century. His was an inquiring mind, persevering in wide-ranging investigations into the traditions.

The essential constituent of Prendergast's vision is its multiple harmonies of color. Employing color toward expressive ends in his chosen media, he progressively mastered and polished each. These color relationships were explored, expanded, and deepened through his watercolors, monotypes, and oils, with ideas from the two former adapted and transformed into the subtler, elaborate, and unpredictable colors of his oils on panel and canvas. The variety of Prendergast's color sensitivity cannot be overestimated; hence the importance of a large-scale exhibition that should make manifest the scope and coherency of his accomplishments.

Prendergast was born in the British Crown Colony of Newfoundland in 1858. Information about his early life is sparse; his family immigrated in 1868 to Boston, where he attended the Rice Grammar School at the same time as, but two years behind, Louis Sullivan (1856-1924). Prendergast was much more sophisticated than has generally been acknowledged; while not a Brahmin, he was no bumpkin either. He knew French, studied Italian, and spent roughly seven years between 1891 and 1914 in France and Italy. Living in New York after 1914, Maurice participated in shows that were accorded wide critical coverage in the press, had a one-man exhibition at the Carroll Galleries, whose silent financial backer was John Quinn, and in 1913 was a member of both the foreign and American committees for the Armory Show. He made enduring friendships among fellow artists, had no enemies, and was on good terms with collectors such as Quinn, Bliss, Phillips, and Barnes—who sent Professor and Mrs. Dewey to visit his studio.

Prendergast exercised a modest erudition that served his own adventurous originality. Fragments of his musings, glimpsed from eighty-eight extant sketchbooks, provide overwhelming evidence not of a naïf but of a man with a steady purpose. He had a penchant for recording aphorisms: "Accustom yourself to master things which you seem to despair of"; "Art is the great stimulus of life—I find it year by year more desirable, and more mysterious." The small notebooks include rapid sketches drawn from nature that were occasionally heightened with watercolor. These drawings record his initial response to a subject and were annotated to recall and lay the groundwork for the color ensembles that were Prendergast's ultimate goal. The sketchbooks also contain references to painters as well as copies after their work. Side by side we find the names Shelley, Nietzsche, Schopenhauer, William James, Tolstoy, Strindberg, Havelock Ellis, and John Muir, all of which merely hint at the intellectual curiosity of a creative personality determined to reason things out for himself. There was nothing haphazard in Prendergast's approach; he was focused, even intense, in channeling his energies. Having been interrupted, he wrote: "I am working. My mind is virtually set to compose, to which everything else is secondary, that is, which interferes with my work . . . ."

And what has this "definitive" show defined? I find myself in disagreement with its make-up, its method, its approach to and conclusions drawn from the pictures and de-

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duced from letters and other collateral documentation. A goodly portion of this miscellany has been accessible in earlier catalogues, and there are unexplained divergences in the author's quotations from previously published texts of some of Maurice's letters. Mathews depends uncritically upon recollections that have not proven to be wholly reliable guideposts. Her essay, with its misleading multiple chapter headings, contains contradictory and inconsequential data, loosely bound by filaments of speculation as to events, influences, and the assignment of dates; its scholarly apparatus is imprecise and meager. She dwells on so many irrelevant topics, whilst skimming over substantive matters, that we are not reassured that the Prendergast Curator has ever immersed herself in the art of Maurice Prendergast.

A representative example: "Maurice . . . spent the next two months [fall 1911] in the hospital recuperating and reading art books. While he did manage to complete a small series of Venetian watercolors, what seems to have had a more lasting impact on his future direction was his discovery, through books, of early Italian painters and art history in general. The tendency of writers on modern art to reinterpret the past in modernist terms gave Prendergast a new way of appreciating older art and opened up an avenue for his art that would occupy him for the rest of his life." Prendergast was not interested in art history. He was a painter who made an intelligent study of art and it is astonishing that the author believes that he spent eighteen months in Italy a dozen years earlier, in addition to three and a half years in Paris, without becoming thoroughly conversant with early Italian painting. Even if some of what he perused was by so-called "writers on modern art"—none are named—it is presumptuous to assert in hindsight that anyone *gave* Prendergast anything, let alone a basis for his own highly refined perceptions. Indeed, the future direction of Prendergast's later oils had already been decisively presaged by figure compositions painted not only prior to the curtailed 1911 Venice stay, but well before his trip to France in 1907.

This points up one of the many glaring flaws of the show, the absence of oils dating from the early 1900s. Immediately following his return from Italy in 1899, Prendergast, in addition to his increased proficiency in watercolor, began to concentrate on oil painting. The color and compositional ideas from his watercolors are consolidated and transferred to the medium that was to absorb him for the rest of his life. This change was apparent at the time, for Charles FitzGerald, writing in *The New York Evening Sun* in 1902, praised "*Festival, Central Park*, by Mr. Maurice Prendergast, whose color clears up as he grows more practised in the use of oils, maintaining the charm and brilliancy of his wonderful little water-colors." Prendergast exhibited across the country, gaining a reputation as a serious colorist to be watched and followed and, important for him, bought. We can gauge how deliberate Maurice could be, for in a 1921 interview with Lewis Mumford in *The Freeman*, in front of one of his landscapes, he pointed out: "Green is the hardest color in the world to paint. It looks easy, but it's very hard; it took me fifteen years to learn to paint a tree." Canvases and panels were often done in series and he exhibited seven, all entitled *Promenade on the Sea Shore*, in January 1904, at the National Arts Club, New York. Generally not as bright as the Revere Beach and Italian watercolors of 1897-99 or the New York and Boston park scenes of 1900-03, they retain vestiges of the subdued tonalities of J. W. Morrice, Whistler, and the brushwork and dark-light contrast of Manet and Winslow Homer. Mathews cites a review by Charles deKay of these oils, painted not in 1904, as she states, but earlier: "His spotty little pictures reveal a sense for color schemes that is very uncommon . . . it is rare to find any one with such a delicate feeling for the relations of colors . . ." But in this retrospective we are not given the opportunity to judge for ourselves.

Salem Willows (Terra Collection, Chicago), a 26 x 34 inch canvas, dated 1904 but worked on for several years, is an important culminating point of Prendergast's experimentation,

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containing within its composition and color ensemble the embryo of the artist's subsequent multi-figure panoramas. The author reproduces this signal picture but dismisses it as one of a group "which tend to be rather dark and thickly painted in a modified Ash Can manner." In actuality, *Salem Willows* extends many of the color features found in the watercolors of 1896-1903, recasting Prendergast's understanding of Carpaccio and the experience of quattrocento frescos, together with Impressionism, particularly that of Pissarro. The brushstroke is already broken and woven into mosaic-like patterns as he explores a distinctly colorful space. Stressed is the muted sparkle of red and orange parasols, vivid blues, greens, and lavenders in the figures' clothes, a variegated spectrum of chalky greens, grays, and tans in the flattened trees and the subdued pale tonalities of water, sails, and clouds. His focus is on solid color-made figures, emphasizing their grace and charm. He leans toward the decorative and it is a composition such as this that subsequently led deKay to write: "Prendergast is pursued by a dream of decorative combinations of colors to which he subjects the groups of city folks, until they look like figures on old faded samplers or wall papers."

Mathews misattributes the origins of Prendergast's mature style not only to art history books he read in 1911 but also to the shock of his 1907 Paris visit: "Prendergast ended up in Paris seeing art that changed his life." In fact, the bright Neo-Impressionist and Fauve paintings he saw there, along with many other old and new masters, were but a verification of the direction in which he was already headed. The author weaves back and forth on this subject and, having omitted primary evidence, regroups: "this muted blue-gray palette was one that he had adopted before his Paris trip (see *April Snow, Salem*) and his appreciation of it in the exhibitions in Paris . . . was a way of affirming his own style in the face of so many new trends. After he had seen the Champs de Mars Salon, but before the Cézanne had opened, he wrote to Charles, 'it [the exhibition] gave me the impression I was working all right.'" It did because the muted color of the winter watercolor was not the same as the luminous reds, oranges, purples and relatively high key color range of *Salem Willows*. This allows the author to proceed to the following: "While Prendergast's painting was on the cutting edge of modernism only briefly, he stayed consistently in the front ranks of the movement from the time of his trip to Paris in 1907 until the middle of the following decade."

Awarding Prendergast the Order of Early Modernism (O.E.M.) has nothing whatsoever to do with a sober analysis of his creative development. Prendergast was not a Fauve or Cubist and cared nothing about such mythologies as being "on the cutting edge," an imaginary contest over status that preoccupies chroniclers of fashion. What he found when he got to France was that other artists were thinking along lines he was already pursuing and this contact reinforced rather than caused his orientation. His conception of painting matured before 1907, a fusion of his Paris experience of 1891-94 and Italy in 1898-99 with his own ideas. What Prendergast perceived in Cézanne's work, both the watercolors and oils, was that pictures could be made of color, without concessions to academic tricks of the sort he had spent more than fifteen years successfully avoiding in the genteel art societies of Boston and New York. It was his own method and independence that he saw reflected, and for all his appreciation of the French artist's achievement, Maurice's work never assumed the appearance of a Cézanne acolyte. In a 1922 letter to Walter Pach he made this explicit: "You are right about Cézanne; his work strengthened and fortified me to pursue my own course."[4]

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4 From a letter of February 2, 1922, to Walter Pach, first cited by William C. Agee in "Walter Pach and Modernism," *Archives of American Art Journal*, Volume 28, Number 3 (1988). Pach sent Prendergast the manuscript of his essay "Maurice Prendergast" (*Shadowland* 6, April 1922) in which he wrote: "A genuine absorption by the American painter of the great Frenchman's principles . . . Probably the first

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Having at their disposal unparalleled information as to the whereabouts of all the artist's oeuvre, and working within the constraints of loans that were unobtainable, could the organizers have made a better selection from the corpus? The answer is yes. Although a number of fine pictures are in the exhibition, their proportion is inadequate to convey the stature of Prendergast's vision. Only one portrait, no flowerpiece, not a single drawing, nor sketchbook, illustrated book, or poster was included.

Other instances where things have gone awry may be noted: in discussing the monotypes, which represent a contribution surpassed in importance only by Degas and Gauguin, Mathews takes her cue from an anonymous 1897 newspaper article that credits Hermann Dudley Murphy, a co-exhibitor of monotypes with Maurice, with having "invented" (the quotations are the author's) the monotype—or "colorprint"—process they used. Perhaps. But shortly thereafter she writes: "During the approximately seven [*sic*] years (*c.* 1895-1902) that Prendergast worked in the medium of monotype . . . " That is another matter. All previous writers have dated a portion of Maurice's monotype production to his Paris years, including the authors of the *Catalogue Raisonné*, who list twenty-three. These include *Le Quatorze Juillet 1892* (The Cleveland Museum of Art), dated on the plate. As to sources, she cites Arthur Wesley Dow and Mary Cassatt, neither of whom had anything to do with the style of Prendergast's monotypes, while bypassing authors such as Peter Wick, who observed that a monotype such as *Orange Market* reflects Pissarro's work in that medium. Not only do we know that Pissarro included his monotypes in at least two of the exhibits that were held at Durand-Ruel while Maurice was in Paris in the early 1890s, but in the aforementioned letter to Pach, Maurice wrote: "I was much influenced by Pissarro but with the watercolors it was nature pure and simple that influenced me. Some effects I would see would really drive me frantic." Pissarro's name is not found in the catalogue.

The unclear manner of presenting documentation is further illustrated by how the facts about Maurice's and Charles's early years are treated. There has been confusion about the birth dates of both, hence authors have listed Maurice's date of birth from 1859 through 1863. Charles claimed that he was born in Boston in 1868. Settling this matter, Mathews corrects a longstanding discrepancy. "They left St. John's, Newfoundland, where Maurice and his brother were born in 1858 and 1863 respectively, and settled in Boston . . . . The boys completed the minimum of eight years of public education at Rice Grammar School in Boston, and then went out to work at the age of fourteen." Translation: we are here not supplied with the information that the family emigrated in 1868 when Maurice was ten and Charles five. Unless the reader carefully consults the chronology, he is led to conclude that the brothers attended school in Boston for eight years. But since Maurice only arrived in Boston at age ten, he must have had four years of schooling in St. John's and completed it with four years at Rice (1868-72). It was Charles who had eight years of schooling in Boston. But even in the chronology it takes an effort to ascertain the facts, so obliquely are they set out. Contrast this with how Robert Twombly, in *Louis Sullivan: His Life and Work* (1986), discusses the milieu in which Sullivan grew up and attended Rice from 1866 to 1870.

The author tries repeatedly to connect Prendergast with the teachings of A. W. Dow. "Prendergast may have gotten the idea of putting architecture at the service of composition from Arthur Wesley Dow." Three paragraphs later: "true to Dow's teaching, *it*

American to realize the importance of the master of the modern school, able to do justice to the broad scope of Cézanne's qualities, Mr. Prendergast did not make over his own art completely. Instead he deepened it along its own lines, with a logic he recognized in the older painter . . ." Prendergast approved of the ideas advanced in the article: "it was a pleasure reading it and you expressed a lot which I feel . . ."

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allowed him [Prendergast] to achieve greater abstraction and balance . . ." (emphasis added). There is an equally convoluted attempt to link Prendergast with Kandinsky. "[Prendergast] also pursued tangential interests in oriental art, modern dance, German Expressionism, the horse-and-rider theme, children's art, fairy-tale and fantasy themes . . ." *Blue Mountains* and *Rider Against Blue Hills*, both dated *c.* 1914-15, and unfinished, are said to be "close to Kandinsky's *Improvisation No. 27*" of 1912 (Metropolitan Museum of Art), which was in the Armory Show. In fact, *Rider Against Blue Hills*, if anything, is related in illustrative terms to Charles's panels of the period, but the connection between the two brothers' work is never examined. *Sunset and Sea Fog*, a nocturne reminiscent of Ryder's thick piling of pigment and blurring of silhouette, of Monticelli in its rugged, sumptuous impasto and of Cézanne's rough pitted surfaces, is also alleged to "suggest the mysticism associated with Kandinsky's philosophy."

In this regard, *Fantasy* is very close to the same eastern source as Charles's *Dancers*, *c.* 1915 (Museum of Fine Arts, Boston). Maurice's occasional experiments with Egyptian, Persian, Hindu, Etruscan, Byzantine, Coptic, and Oriental art around this time were in large measure a response to the gleaming panels that his brother had begun to carve and gild in 1912. Charles's chests, screens, and panels surrounded Maurice in their studio throughout the last ten years of his life and, as Ira Glackens observed, "these treasures, in all their glowing colors, made the place as rich as a palace." Maurice had participated in frame design as well as production and even worked on and co-signed one of the large gessoed panels. Although it was Maurice's compositions and color patterns that provided the broad conceptual underpinning for Charles's designs, it was by means of Charles's unique decorative opulence that the exotic Persian-Oriental effects of space, light, and linear arabesques were made tangible to Maurice—not via secondhand sources such as Kandinsky's writings. In the picture selection, "tangential interests" are given disproportionate emphasis, mislabeled "symbolist," and misunderstood both in relation to their origins and to the collaborative interaction of the brothers.

It is claimed that "in the development of modernist mural painting in the mid-teens, Prendergast's role must be considered important—but brief," yet the author, citing Doreen Bolger, tells us that the two mural-sized paintings, *Picnic* and *Promenade*, were not painted by Prendergast, that he "prepared sketches and the murals were actually painted by members of the Co-operative Mural Workshops." There is no explanation of why these atypical canvases—two disparate watercolors that have been blown up—figure so prominently in the show, since their thin, watery texture, so foreign to Maurice's contemporary oils in their lack of built-up paint surface, are fundamentally at odds with his aesthetic aims. That this reattribution was first put forward at a 1988 symposium devoted to the Prendergasts, organized and published by the WCMA, should have allowed time either to affirm the proper attributions in the catalogue entries, or exclude them altogether.

Selected highlights of "Maurice Prendergast" include the seven *Sketches in Paris*, *c.* 1892-94, 6¼ x 3¾ inch park views with women and/or children on pipe-stem legs that reveal awareness of Whistler, Morrice, and C. W. Steer among the expatriot anglophones in Paris, and recall as well Manet, Pissarro, and scenes found in such early Impressionist variants as Zandomeneghi's *La Place d'Anvers*, 1880 (Galleria d'Arte Moderna Ricci Oddi, Piacenza).

Revere Beach, dated 1896, with its gray, beige, and pale green touches, uses a central band of figures and a diminutive second file in the distance at the water's edge. The composition is firmly anchored by the dramatic red parasol in the center that sets surrounding units in space. This concision of detail and pervasive colorfulness is further explored in *Rocky Shore, Nantasket*, with its red umbrella and delicate polka-dot dress in the center, irregular patterns of rocks, fig-

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ures, umbrellas, and water interspersed and tilted like a page from a Persian miniature, while tiny pristine figures at the horizon provide a faint hint of Homer. This merging of firm illustrative delineation and abstract freedom typifies Prendergast's early watercolors.

In the watercolors of 1898-99, Prendergast discovered the splendor of Venice. Building upon the subtle color adjustments of the New England coastal series, the Italian watercolors take on an even deeper level of richness and complexity, assuming a luminosity and transparency that in sheet after sheet simply dazzle in their vibrant, airy, shimmering sweep. *Easter Procession, St. Mark's* has the appeal of a bejeweled Byzantine book cover. A smoky atmospheric resonance illuminates this large-scale interior; the red processional banner in the foreground is effective as a space-defining device as were the red umbrellas in the seaside watercolors, while the chandelier suspended at the left and crucifix in the center serve similar roles. *St. Mark's Square, Venice (The Clock Tower)* transmits the scintillating colorfulness of the Venetian watercolors. The glowing parasols, the background with its gold leaflike flecks on a field of blue that serves as a foil for the lion of St. Mark, and the zodiac signs, numerals, and minuscule details, are masterfully fitted into a most unusual vertical format. His finesse as a draughtsman is revealed by the cluster of figures and umbrellas in the lower left, an ensemble recalling Daumier's children spilling out of the school doorway. Prendergast's show-card lettering and early design experience may be discerned in the control of the brush and terse precision with which the 10:30 of the clock calendar is rendered.

Madison Square, 1901, is a reprise of the Italian themes with its graphic banners and architectural details, horses and wagons, carriages and streetcar. The play of shadow and sunlight, the delicious multicolor shapes of the figures, umbrellas, and poodle, eloquently assert Prendergast's command of the medium. The Brueghelian *East River*, reminiscent of Pissarro's quayside vistas, has a dusty rose and gray-over-blue color scheme underlying its diagonal grid composition. The sprightly detail in *May Day, Central Park* (cat. 42) contrasts with *May Day, Central Park* (cat. 41), whose broad filigree screen is held in place by dense foreground shadows. In another of his variations on the park subject, *Central Park*, 1901, Prendergast had different color sequences in mind as he reworked the familiar motifs. In this composition, the foreground is augmented with touches of pastel. The open unpainted areas that define the reins of the horsemen are a particular tour de force. Years later Maurice paid careful attention to and pointed out this very feature of Cézanne's work. With *Surf, Nantasket, c.* 1903-05, color application becomes less dainty and more diffused; in *April Snow, Salem*, with its weathered surface, an animated Rubensian flourish of linear outlines, especially in the figures at the left, becomes apparent.

Paris Omnibus and *In Luxembourg Gardens*, both of 1907, are an outgrowth of Prendergast's earlier postcard-sized panels, Seurat's pochades, and the Neo-Impressionism of such contemporaries as Signac and Louis Valtat. Expressive color experiments in which the intermediate pale tonalities of *Salem Willows* are forsaken, intensify the Impressionist color and the modified Manet brushwork of previous oils. Pigment is applied in overlapping strokes of varying size and direction, their unctuosity amplified by the sheen of the wood surfaces, with a resultant internal glow not previously seen in his oils. Insufficiently represented in the exhibition, these small vignettes, in addition to the panels painted at St. Malo that summer, are an important step toward Maurice's later oils, even though *In Luxembourg Gardens* retains essential compositional features already found in *Salem Willows* and the 1901 watercolor *West Church, Boston*. In subsequent years, as he becomes comfortable with the intensified color, Prendergast often reintroduces paler tones as he elaborates his polychromatic color networks.

Prendergast's paintings coalesce in the theme of the arcadian idyll, an updated *fête*

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galante. In these pastorals he pursued color combinations with almost systematic devotion. Gracefully choreographed sequences of elongated figures are unified by a gentle rhythmic flow of line and pattern that lends a contrapuntal variety to the compositions. Maurice worked and reworked his surfaces, often over a period of years, to gain his interwoven webs of paint, synthesizing the color, light, and atmospheric space that are at the core of his art.

Prendergast did not invest his preferred motif with symbolical or specific mythological meanings; his ancestry is specific and in no way esoteric: quattrocento frescos, Carpaccio, Giorgione, Poussin, Watteau, Puvis de Chavannes, Cézanne, Renoir, Gauguin, and Denis among the classicists, and others such as Monticelli, Conder, Cross, K.-X. Roussel, Bonnard, and Charles Guérin. This unbroken tradition nourished Prendergast—as it had Cézanne and Matisse—and he freely adapted and explored his own ideas; his color relationships took on an intricacy and depth distinct from mere Impressionism, formulaic Neo-Impressionism, or any of their dependents. As his conception of pictures progressed, patterns become less attached to specific illustrative sources, until the surfaces become virtually seamless, their glowing scumbled textures, gently stroked, daubed and dragged, sensuous, saturated by the piling of pigment, build up unexpected juxtapositions that pull the eye over the canvas, imparting a crusty tapestry effect that Ryder, Monticelli, Cézanne of the mid-1870s, and Rouault would find congenial.

Examples of major oils in the exhibition include *The Swans*, *c.* 1914-15, densely knit together with a silvery pearly opalescence. *Landscape with Figures*, of 1921, one of Maurice's favorite crepuscular compositions, employs a verdant architectonic setting for the sinuously outlined players in its rustic drama. Related thematic material is found in *Acadia*, *c.* 1918-23, with its Ryderesque russets and ambers, and textures extended to the frontiers of late Titian. In its dry suffused sparkle of blue, lavender, orange, and yellow hues, *Along the Shore*, *c.* 1914, subordinates a leafy enframement in favor of an interlaced layering of space; three Giottoesque donkeys are threaded among the compact atmospheric warp and weft of stately simplified figures. *New England Harbor*, *c.* 1919-23, balances figures and architecture in a succession of peninsular outcroppings that spring from Maurice's contemporary pastels over watercolor that in turn are based upon numerous annotated drawings in his sketchbooks. These fully realized majestic oils of Prendergast's last decade are a pleasure to behold, but insufficient to allow for a comprehensive understanding of the artist's achievement.

Painters cannot be assured that critics will recapture their precise intentions, and since they cannot sue for interpretive malpractice, let us sum up with the words of George Santayana, as astute an observer of the American university system as has ever served within its recondite culture:

> Many of the younger professors . . . are no longer the sort of persons that might as well have been . . . schoolmasters; they have rather the type of mind of a doctor, an engineer, or a social reformer; less eloquent . . . than the older generation . . . very professional in tone and conscious of his *Fach* [specialty]; not that he would deny for a moment the many-sided ignorance to which nowadays we are all reduced, but that he thinks he can get on well without the things he ignores. His education has been more pretentious than thorough; his style is deplorable . . . . He has no peace in himself . . . and in his heart perhaps little taste for mere scholarship . . . . Like the plain soldier staggering under his clumsy equipment, he is cheerful; he keeps his faith in himself and in his allotted work, puts up with being toasted only on one side, remains open-minded, whole-hearted, appreciative, helpful, confident of the future of goodness and of science . . . .
>
> It is evident that such minds will have but a loose hold on tradition, even on the genteel tradition . . . . Not that in general they oppose or dislike it; their alienation from it is more radical; they forget it.

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Formal poetry in the land of the free

by Bruce Bawer

Recently I spent three days at a private high school in New England, doing something that, given my considerable unease over the rise of the creative-writing establishment, I had thought I would never do: I taught a poetry workshop.

Not, mind you, that a poetry workshop is necessarily a terrible thing. Some of my best friends teach poetry workshops. And I would never contest the proposition that the guidance of a certain type of poet can be of real value to a certain type of student. Surely one can imagine a gifted, intelligent fledgling poet profiting from the experience of working closely with a more mature poet who loves his art, has a technical mastery of it, knows its history, and, while maintaining high standards of discipline, discrimination, and technique, is open-minded enough to allow the student to develop in his own direction—and who, moreover, has the time, energy, sensitivity, and dedication to help him find that direction.

But unblinkered veterans of creative-writing programs know that this ideal is seldom approached, let alone attained. More often, students are encouraged to view poetry not as an art but as a profession; encouraged not to aspire to excellence but to tailor their work to a marketplace that exalts blandness and mediocrity; encouraged not to work hard at poems over a substantial period of time, but to churn them out like assembly-line products. Moreover, as the poet David Dooley observes in his recent essay "The Contemporary Workshop Aesthetic," workshops tend to produce students who write pretty much the way their teachers do—which means, at least nine times out of ten, that they manufacture tame, slack, and highly derivative free-verse lyrics consisting mostly of (a) jejune personal confession that the poet has made little attempt to render interesting or meaningful, and by means of which he advertises his sincerity and sensitivity; (b) familiar surreal imagery whose intended attraction is presumably its quality of freshness, surprise, and subversiveness; and/or (c) lackluster, undiscriminating descriptions of foliage, land forms, and such, the point of which is to demonstrate the poet's responsiveness to nature and his attention to detail.[1]

Formal poetry? Forget it. If traditional form and meter are covered at all in workshops, they tend to be treated at best as exotic options, at worst as quaint historical curiosities—things that a contemporary poet should know about in the same way that scientists should know about alchemy or Lamarck's theory of acquired characteristics. Even teachers who harbor an affection for form and meter are likely to place little emphasis on these matters in class, partly because they know that formal poetry (despite somewhat greater acceptance in recent years) is still not smiled upon by most American

1 Dooley's article appears in the Summer 1990 issue of *The Hudson Review*.

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poetry editors, but even more so because, in the small amount of time that these teachers are able to devote to any one student, the best they can hope to do is to help him to avoid outrageous mistakes—to help him, that is, to *look* professional, so that he'll get published and, in turn, get hired to teach creative writing elsewhere. These teachers know that the best way to keep a young poet's middling or underdeveloped talent from showing through is to teach him to write—well—tame, slack, derivative free-verse lyrics; and they know, conversely, that the *last* thing to do is to introduce him in any serious way to the demands of form and meter, which, aside from being regarded by many poets as repressive and retrogressive, have a funny way of exposing a poet's deficiencies.

Though many creative-writing teachers will concede the truth of these criticisms in conversation, few will do so in print. Which is why it was refreshing to find Wayne Dodd, in an interview with Robert Bly in the latter's book *American Poetry: Wildness and Domesticity*, confessing that while he makes his living as a teacher of creative writing,

> I always feel uncomfortable with a workshop situation because it seems to me to be such an essentially negative, or to borrow your metaphor, domesticating, function. . . . Often it [the workshop] teaches you how *not* to do certain things. It teaches you how not to make gross mistakes that are going to be unacceptable. . . . But is that the same as learning to write poetry?[2]

Bly's answer: No. Both poets go on to admit that, as Bly puts it, "[t]here's some kind of lie that the workshops, and visiting poets, are involved in. I'm involved in it."

Why, then, when an invitation came from friends of mine to teach at a three-day "writer's conference" for aspiring high-school poets and short-story writers, did I agree to become a part of this "lie"? Part of the reason was that I figured the experience would do me good: as a veteran of two or three undergraduate writing workshops, and as a longtime observer and critic of the creative-writing industry, I figured that I should take the opportunity to look at things, for once, from the teacher's end. But the determining factor was that I saw this also as an opportunity to do something seditious—namely, to get a crack at these teenagers before the undergraduate workshops and M.F.A. programs did, and to encourage them to write in *form*.

I would, I decided, teach a workshop on the sonnet. During the first three-hour session I would give them a handout containing one sonnet apiece by Wyatt, Shakespeare, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Frost, Thomas, and Lowell, as well as two recent sonnets by young contemporary poets—one by Phillis Levin about Rilke, and one by Molly Peacock about lawn mowing. There wouldn't, of course, be time to give any of these poems its due; but the students would at least be forced to confront the fact that a variety of poets through the centuries, with very different sensibilities, concerns, and voices, have nonetheless chosen, for some reason, to work in sonnet form; they would come to recognize how flexible the sonnet form was, would notice the wonderful variations in theme and tone and diction that these nine sonnets displayed, would hear the distinctive sound of the rhymed pentameter line in the hands of each of these nine poets. Or, rather, seven poets—for Lowell's sonnet is in iambic tetrameter, and Levin's doesn't rhyme.

The students would see, too, that in choosing to follow a general iambic scheme, a poet is not forcing himself into a metronomic straitjacket, but establishing a background pattern, rather like a regular drumbeat behind a guitar solo; they would see that the sonnet form, when skillfully employed, makes possible a witty, playful tension between the poles of structure and freedom, a tension not unlike that between the melody of a familiar popular song and a jazz musician's interpretation of it. They would see that to write a sonnet is to place oneself in the

2 My review of Robert Bly's book appeared in the October issue of *The New Criterion*.

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context of every other sonnet ever written, and that those sonnets become the subtext of one's own poem. In short, they would see that, to a true poet, form is no enemy but a friend, no prison cell but a set of wings.

The students who were to be in my workshop had submitted from one to three poems apiece along with their application materials, and these manuscripts were forwarded to me a few weeks before the conference. When I examined them, I was surprised to find the poems considerably worse than I had expected. Only two or three of them featured rhyme or traditional forms (wasn't it just yesterday that teenagers thought poems *had* to rhyme?), and those that did were stiff, lifeless doggerel—even worse than the free-verse poems. The notable exception was a promising villanelle, which proved to be the work of a senior at the private high school where the conference was taking place. Once the conference had begun, it did not take long for me to realize that this boy and his schoolmates were vastly more sophisticated and articulate than the other students, who attended local public high schools.

And this, it should be said, was no coincidence. That private school impressed me enormously: it had small classes, twelve-hour class days, and an intensive arts-oriented curriculum; the students were taught out of original texts, not dumbed-down textbooks, and the older ones taught classes themselves. They read the classics of literature and philosophy, played Bach on the harpsichord, Chopin on the piano, Mozart in chamber groups; in the school atelier they painted and sculpted and drew, and in the school theater they put on polished productions of Molière in French. They were, it appeared, the products of as fine a liberal-arts education as money can buy in the United States in 1990. Nor was any of this surface learning: their education had given them a real understanding of the principles of art, and—it had been made clear to me—of the way form functioned in symphonies, paintings, and plays. When I thought of my own more pedestrian public-high-school education, it all seemed quite overwhelming.

Which is why it struck me as all the more extraordinary, on the opening day of the conference, that the students—even the ones from this magnificent school—simply couldn't understand something that I had understood, I think, at the age of twelve: the purpose of poetic form and meter. For all their wide reading, they had given little thought to the function of form in poetry. Why, they asked, after I had handed out the copies of Wyatt, Shakespeare, et al., and had begun talking about the sonnet, would a poet write in a traditional form? Why would he want to restrict his expressiveness in such an unnatural way? It was a puzzlement to them, a matter of frustration. And it frustrated me, too—for if these students, with their extraordinary training in art, music, and culture, didn't have a clue as to why someone would write in form, then what hope was there for more ordinary students at more ordinary schools?

The brightest student in my workshop —the villanelle-writing senior from the host school who (I had been told) wrote compelling essays on art and philosophy, played piano and cello, taught tenth-grade math, had exceptional talent as a visual artist, was fluent in French and German, and had performed splendidly in the title role of *The Misanthrope*—this paragon was the most persistent of all. That he couldn't understand the purpose of poetic form especially surprised me, not only because he had written that villanelle (apparently as a class exercise), but also because, when asked the name of his favorite poet, he had unhesitatingly said, "Blake." Presumably, then, he liked *some* poetry that used rhyme and meter, and he knew how to use them himself if he wanted to. But he couldn't see *why* he should want to. To him, as to the others in the class, composing such a thing as a sonnet seemed a pointless exercise—a game, like a crossword puzzle, that had nothing to do with the free-verse effusions they all enjoyed writing.

And that was the problem: they did enjoy writing poetry. But they didn't enjoy it, I gathered, in the same way that they enjoyed painting or playing the piano. For in art and

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music, they took for granted the idea of formal and technical principles, and knew the exhilaration and the challenge of struggling to master them. Somehow or other, though, they had gotten the idea that poetry was different. Poetry, to them, was patently something of a holiday from those more disciplined arts—a chance to express themselves without restraint, to pour out their romantic agonies, their irritation with their parents, their anguish over not being children anymore. If they had come here to work on their own free-verse poems, it was not to improve them in a technical or formal sense, but simply to make clearer and more coherent the unfettered expression of personal feeling. They did not disguise the fact that my determination to have them write sonnets made them look upon me as a killjoy, out to ruin their pleasure and thwart their self-exploration. That form and meter might help to take them beyond the rudimentary level of their current efforts in verse did not occur to them. Indeed, it was not until the villanelle writer asked me for the third time to explain the reason for writing in sonnet form, and I launched into my third explanation—this time, in desperation, drawing an analogy with sonata form—that a light began to come into his eyes. He was, I felt, beginning to catch on.

Yet none of them was entirely convinced. And they were, I sensed, impatient with all this chatter about other people's poems: they wanted to discuss their own. At my direction, they tried to write sonnets before our second meeting; but they did so half-heartedly, and none were comfortable enough with what they had written to share them with the rest of us. Consequently, we spent our last three meetings talking about the poems they had submitted with their applications. We didn't even get to consider that villanelle; the author vetoed that idea, choosing instead to have us examine the two free-verse poems he had submitted, the longer of which was addressed to Allen Ginsberg and began with these memorable lines: "I stay home / and moan your poetry / till it gives me an erection."

If the poems had their flaws, however, the discussions went beautifully. These teenagers who couldn't quite fathom the justification for writing in traditional form and meter had a near-expert knowledge of how to take apart a free-verse poem and put it back together again. Plainly, most or all of them had extensive poetry-workshop backgrounds. The villanelle writer was particularly impressive, putting his finger immediately on the fundamental problems with his fellow students' poems. He was excellent at elucidating and simplifying obscure passages, at noticing connections, at seeing logical contradictions between lines that were half a page apart, at noting inconsistencies in point of view, and at pointing out weak lines, explaining why they were weak, and offering changes for improvement. Yet the more brilliantly he performed, the more troubled I was by the fact that even he could look at a contemporary sonnet and shake his head in bemusement.

It was disconcerting. I had come to this conference hoping that, in a very small way, I might buck the creative-writing establishment; but I hadn't counted on the influence of that establishment having extended so widely that even the smartest senior—and, it appeared, the most serious writer—at a first-rate liberal-arts high school would have so much trouble understanding why a novice poet should want to compose a sonnet. Returning home on the Boston-New York train, I wished only that I had been prepared for such massive resistance, and that I had been more successful at communicating to this boy why form and meter mattered to me, and why I thought they should matter to him.

I can only wish now that I had been able to hand him a copy of Timothy Steele's new book, *Missing Measures: Modern Poetry and the Revolt against Meter*.[3] For this critical and historical study, whose author is himself a

3 *Missing Measures: Modern Poetry and the Revolt against Meter*, by Timothy Steele; University of Arkansas Press, 340 pages, $22.95; $12.95 paper.

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very gifted formal poet (*Uncertainties and Rest; Sapphics Against Anger*), might well have been written to explain to an intelligent novice poet why form and meter should be important to him. Steele places the modernist revolt in the context of the history of poetry, arguing forcefully that the revolt's emphasis on free verse made it a unique event and that this singular emphasis, and the continuing dominance of free verse in our own time, have proceeded from grievous misconceptions on the part of the revolutionaries and their successors, and have turned poetry into something those revolutionaries would never have wanted it to become.

Steele reminds us that poetry has always had its revolutions, which have generally been led by relatively young poets who feel that the poetry of their elders has grown stale, stuffy, tired; he notes that Euripides, Horace, Dryden, Wordsworth, Villon, and the Symbolists, among others, all led revolts of this sort, and declares that such periodic upheavals are needed to keep poetry fresh and vigorous. But these have always, he points out, been revolutions in language; poets may have rejected the formal or metrical choices made by their elders and made others instead (as the Romantics dropped the heroic couplet and took to the sonnet and blank verse), but they never entirely repudiated form and meter. What makes literary modernism unique, Steele argues, is that it was the only poetic rebellion many of whose leaders saw form and meter as an inextricable part of the problem with their predecessors' poetry, and accordingly chose to write in free verse.

How did this come to pass? Steele traces the free-verse revolt back to Kant and the doctrine of aestheticism, whose stress on the individual consciousness and on the poem as a self-contained object "freed poetry not only from ethical and rational understanding, but from its own history." Furthermore, Steele argues audaciously that the modernists—and he focuses especially on the critical writings of Eliot, Pound, and Williams—"misunderstood meter." They grew up, he writes, in

> a world in which Swinburne was the chief poet and in which Swinburneanism was the mode most obviously available to the young poet. Swinburne was a dead end . . . because of the numbingly emphatic quality of the verse. It was because the metrical effects of the verse . . . insisted on themselves as metrical effects in the absence of serious and vital subject matter. It was because the verse almost seemed to preclude mature and flexible expression.

If Swinburnean verse was a dead end, however, late Victorian prose fiction was vibrant and colorful—which, Steele notes, may explain Pound's declaration that "poetry must be as well written as prose," a precept which in any previous era would simply not have made sense, since it had always been prose that sought to mimic the techniques of poetry, never the reverse.

Steele also cites J. V. Cunningham's interesting argument that the problem lies in the modernists' elementary-school educations. Cunningham says that when English poetry began to be taught in the schools during the late nineteenth century, students were taught to read it aloud in a singsong, metronomic manner, in order that they be able to identify the underlying metrical patterns. It was this practice, Cunningham suggests, that incited the modernist rebellion against meter, and prompted Pound, in his famous list of Imagist principles, to ordain that poets should "compose in the sequence of a musical phrase, not in sequence of a metronome."

This dictum of Pound's is often cited approvingly by opponents of formal verse; yet his musical analogy has always seemed to me misbegotten. Its obvious implication is that conventional meter makes it impossible to write poetry that flows like music—which leads one to wonder how Pound accounts for the fact that musical phrases can themselves be divided into conventional measures. Indeed, just as a piece of music can be written in 4/4 time, say, and yet flow naturally, so (as Steele puts it) "conventional versification accommodates personally distinctive rhythm within the norm of measure." Pound's delib-

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erate vagueness on this point is denoted by his odd, blurry use of the word "sequence" to mean both "surface movement" and "underlying pattern." It is interesting to realize that if he had been more precise in spelling out his analogy, the fallacy at the heart of it would have been far more evident.

To say such things about Pound or the other modernists, of course, is not to condemn modernism *tout court*, or to suggest that Steele does so. On the contrary, he writes about Eliot, Pound, and company with respect, acknowledging that they "abandoned meter out of a genuine wish to renovate verse and reconnect it to a real world and a real audience." His complaint is simply that, to a great extent, the effect of this abandonment of meter "has been to deprive poetry of resources that enable it to examine human experience appealingly, distinctively, and meaningfully." In other words, if poetic revolution was once a cyclical affair—a recurrent, generation-by-generation process of self-renewal—modernism's rejection of meter, though revitalizing in the short term, proved eventually to be destructive, the beginning of a downward spiral in which each new generation of poets would revolt against its predecessors not by energizing the language of verse but by moving progressively further from the rigors of traditional form and meter, and writing poems that were ever more slack and shapeless.

Steele recognizes that the modernists would have been the first to deplore the situation of poetry today, and notes that, in fact, they expressed concern in later years "that their revolution was not followed by a period of consolidation, but by increasingly casual and incoherent experiments with poetic form." He cites Eliot's 1947 remark that "[w]e cannot, in literature, any more than in the rest of life, live in a perpetual state of revolution," and quotes from a letter that Eliot wrote in 1950: "I was shocked when my grand-niece presented me with some verses that she had written as school exercises to find that little girls in an American school were *encouraged* to write in vers libre."

What would those high-school students I met at the "writer's conference" have made of Eliot's shock at this discovery? They would, I think, have been very perplexed—unable to reconcile Eliot's enthusiasm for vers libre with his displeasure at its being taught in school. What makes this confusion possible, of course, is that these students live in an age when poetry *does* look upon itself as being in a permanent state of revolution, and when the headquarters of that revolution, furthermore, have long since been relocated to the academy; paradoxical though this alliance of academy and poetic revolution may be, even the brightest of teenagers today have never known any other set of circumstances, and so it is difficult for them to see, as Eliot did, that such an alliance is destined to foster a poetry establishment dominated by inert, insular, and technically inept rebels without a cause—a poetry establishment which, for all its stagnancy and need for revitalization, is ironically all the more difficult to overthrow than previous establishments precisely *because* it has taken possession of the very idea of revolution.

Of course, creative-writing teachers today can dismiss Eliot's objections to the institutionalization of free verse as the grumblings of an elitist snob, a man from St. Louis who turned himself into an Englishman; the great appeal of free verse, for many of them, is that they view it as inherently American, and meter and form as British. They derive this idea largely from William Carlos Williams, whom contemporary free-verse poets tend to look upon as their founding father. Steele rightly criticizes this schematic view, arguing that "[m]eter has nothing in particular to do with . . . England," being "common to the poetries of many different societies [going] back to prehistoric times," and that it is similarly wrongheaded to "talk of an 'American' tradition in poetry, as if this were a single massive flood upon which every poet in our country is obliged to launch his bark." Besides, as Steele points out, even Williams, in his later years, was displeased by younger poets' absolute renunciation of form and meter, complaining in "The Poem

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as a Field of Action" that "the tiresome repetition of this 'new,' now twenty years old, disfigures every journal," and protesting in 1953 that "[t]here is nothing interesting in the construction of our poems, nothing that can jog the ear out of its boredom. . . . I among the rest have much to answer for. . . . Without measure we are lost. But we have lost even the ability to count."

As for the absurd but widespread notion that free verse is somehow democratic and traditional form and meter elitist, Steele advises that those who hold this view should keep in mind that Pound and Wyndham Lewis were Nazi apologists. He observes, too, that "throughout most of literary history, readers and listeners have loved and venerated verse more" than prose, and that "[i]ts primacy has derived from meter" —which, given the fact that the rise of free verse has seen poetry lose its general audience, makes it seem more reasonable to identify free verse as elitist and metered verse as democratic than to do the reverse.

Steele presents, in short, a splendid argument for the continuing value of traditional form and meter. I fear, however, that it won't change the minds of many unadulterated free-verse poets or of the academic critics who champion them and malign formalism. Steele founds his defense of meter and traditional form on the fact that they have been a consistent part of Western civilization since its Greek beginnings; but to many free-verse poets and their critical champions it is precisely this civilization that is suspect. Fervent anti-formalists despise the Western tradition, and one cannot imagine them looking upon Steele's marvelously erudite display of classical learning with anything other than bemusement or contempt; indeed, they often condemn poets of Steele's ilk as reactionaries who are out to undermine the anarchic freedom of contemporary poetry, to silence subversive voices, and so forth—all the usual rhetoric, none of which has anything to do with the making of art.

Steele, needless to say, knows all this: he knows that poetry has, in large part, fallen into the hands of anti-intellectuals who have little interest in literary history and who, as he puts it, "confus[e] what is extrinsic to poetic structure with what is intrinsic to it," reducing "formal poet" (if they acknowledge such a concept at all) to a mere subcategory along with all sorts of artistically meaningless groupings based on politics ("feminist poet") or ethnic background ("black poet") or sexual orientation ("gay poet"), and defending the most confused and undisciplined free verse by saying that "we should write in a crazy fashion because our times are crazy." As Steele observes, such poets don't realize that all times feel crazy to those who live in them, or that by expressing in their poetry a glibly nihilistic philosophy they may "be inviting us to collaborate with the very forces we should resist."

There are times, to be sure, when even this enthusiastic reader does not agree entirely with Steele. I think he's a bit unfair to Robert Lowell, for example, whose explanation, in his *Paris Review* interview, of his decision to "break forms" in *Life Studies* moves Steele to unnecessary sarcasm. (My own feeling is that Lowell was a better poet after he loosened up—but I also think that he, like other ex-formalists, made a good free-verse writer largely because his experience as a formalist gave his best free-verse poems a tautness, a sense of shape and rhythm, that many other free-verse poems don't have.) One also feels from time to time—for instance, during Steele's discussion of aestheticism—that he is too inclined to view the ancient Greeks as the ultimate authorities, and to consider everything that came afterward an aberration precisely to the degree that it departs from Greek theory and practice.

But for every time that one differs with Steele, there are a dozen times when one nods fervently in agreement. And it should be emphasized that Steele is not proposing that free verse be abolished; he is merely demonstrating that form and meter are valuable tools which have served the aims of poetry well for millennia, and that these tools are inadequately appreciated by many poets. To be sure, there are doubtless many free-verse poets who, regarding poetry mainly as a

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means of self-expression, are in the habit of identifying the poem with the self it expresses, and consequently are inclined to see arguments for the value of form and meter as a hostile act against the free-verse poet's self—an attempt to confine, to stifle. Steele, in the final words of his book, implicitly addresses this contemporary poetic emphasis on the poet, and on the ephemeral gratifications of tossed-off, undisciplined verse, by shifting emphasis to the reader, and to the deeper, long-term pleasures that memorable, well-crafted poetry can provide. "Only the poetry of our time," he writes, "can offer the prospect that, after we and those we love have returned to dust, some reader somewhere will be moved by lines that bear witness to us and will commit our words to heart and mind that we may live again." These words strike at the essence of what poetry is, or should be, all about, and in their passion, seriousness, cadence, and amplitude epitomize the very qualities that are most wanting in contemporary free verse.

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"Borders"
by Leslie Norris

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i.m. John Ormond, died May 4th 1990

The border I knew best was halfway over
the bridge between the town and Breconshire.
Beneath,
the river's neutral water
moved on
to other boundaries.

I walked the bridge each Saturday, stopped
at a guessed measure,
lived a moment in adventurous limbo.
Did I stand on air then, invisibly
taken to some unknown world, some nowhere?
Where was I then? I was whole
but felt an unseen line
divide me, send my strong half forward,
keep my other timidly at home.

I have always lived that way,
crossed borders resolutely
while looking over my shoulder.

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Not long ago
driving in America
in high cold desert country below the Rockies,
I saw at the roadside
parked on an acre open as the moon
a ring of shabby cars,
old Chevies and Caddies,
some prosperous trucks.
The Indians were showing on folding tables
their ceremonial silver, heavy necklaces rich
with turquoise and hammered squash-blossom, oval
silver bangles.
Navajo and Zuni,
old tribes, hardy and skilled.
They stood behind their work in the flat wind,
not smiling.
I love the things they make,
haggled for a buckle for my belt,
silver, a design
rayed like the cold sun,
and, walking away, saw
cut into the concrete
the meeting place of four states.

Crouched there, I placed a foot in Utah,
a foot in Arizona, my palms flat
in the dust of Colorado and New Mexico.

Restless as dust, scattered.

A man I knew, my old friend,
moved out as I did, but returned,
followed his eyes and crossed the borders
into his own country. When he left,
it was to see his place from a distance
and peacefully go home. The world grew small
for him, to one country, a city, a house.

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His mother, calmly and nobly dying,
asked on her last day for champagne
which she had never tasted. She wet her lips,
and in the evening called into her room
someone unseen. "Who would have thought it,"
she said, very clearly, and crossed the border
for which all others are a preparation.

And Sally Taylor, her mother dying in the next room,
heard women's voices, young and laughing,
come in to fetch the old lady.

Border, boundary, threshold, door—
Orpheus moved either way, the living and the dead
were parted by a thin reflection
he simply walked through. But who can follow?

For all the boundaries I have crossed, flown over,
knowingly, unknowingly, I have no answers;
but sit in the afternoon sun, under mountains
where stale snow clings in shadowy patches,
remember my friend, how he had sung,
hope he is still singing.

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Music

Weisgall's marvelous "Six Characters"

by Samuel Lipman

Please do not be surprised when a reality is born, formed and invoked by the magic of the stage itself—Do you not believe in the creative power of your own profession?
—The Father, in *Six Characters in Search of an Author*

A momentous event in American opera took place in Chicago at the Lyric Opera Center for American Artists (the junior company of the Lyric Opera of Chicago) this past June. This event was almost unheralded; it was only noticed locally, and (save for an enthusiastic review by *The New Yorker*'s Andrew Porter) it was ignored afterward by a national press interested on the one hand in star singers and on the other in the latest "cutting-edge" atrocities. Nevertheless, Hugo Weisgall's *Six Characters in Search of an Author* (1956), with a libretto by the Irish playwright Denis Johnston, showed itself, in the September National Public Radio broadcast of the Chicago performances, to be a masterpiece, and perhaps indeed *the* masterpiece, of American opera. At the very least, it is now plain that *Six Characters* deserves to be placed on the level of such vastly important works as Virgil Thomson's *Four Saints in Three Acts* (1928), Douglas Moore's *The Ballad of Baby Doe* (1956), and Samuel Barber's *Antony and Cleopatra* (1966).

It cannot be said that *Six Characters* was absolutely unknown prior to its Chicago performance. Commissioned in the mid-1950s by the Ditson Fund at Columbia University and produced at the New York City Opera in the 1958-59 and 1959-60 seasons with funding from the Ford Foundation, the opera was a great success on its premiere, and won admirers notable both for their sophistication and for their enthusiasm. But these days success among the cultivated does not a place in the operatic repertory make, and *Six Characters* did not receive a professional production in all the years from the beginning of the 1960s until its rescue five months ago by the good taste and high courage of Ardis Krainik, the Lyric Opera's General Director.

Before we can understand why this miscarriage of artistic justice should have taken place, it is necessary to examine the nature of *Six Characters* as a work of art. This examination must begin with the remarkable 1921 play by the Italian author Luigi Pirandello on which the opera is based. The play immediately established itself as one of the monuments of the modern European theater, a reputation which it has not lost to this day; it has been available since the 1920s in various English translations.

As a whole, Pirandello's plays—including the recently much-done *Henry IV*—were founded upon a rejection, at once principled and emotional, of so-called ordinary reality, and its supersession by the created reality Pirandello attempted to put on the stage. *Six Characters* presents simultaneously a group of actors and the characters (in real life, so to speak) they hope to portray. The characters

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are not content to be at the mercy of the actors, and wish to find an author to tell their own, as yet unwritten, story. What Pirandello means to accomplish is thus first to destroy the illusionism of the stage and its practitioners, and then, by artistic sleight-of-hand, to claim that the creations of art can replace life.

Weisgall and his librettist had the brilliant idea of turning the Pirandello play-within-a-play into an opera-within-an-opera. Thus Pirandello's actors now become opera singers, and his stage characters operatic characters. The intermediary between professionals and the uncooperative personages they hope to portray remains the Director, transformed from genus theatrical to genus operatic. The six characters turn out to be six members of a troubled family—the very voluble Father, Mother, Son, and Stepdaughter, a silent young boy, and an equally silent young girl whose unrelated and unmotivated drowning provides the denouement of the story; the Stepdaughter and the two children are the illegitimate offspring of the Mother by another man, now dead. There is one additional character, at once peripheral and central: Madame Pace, a dressmaker doubling as the keeper of a brothel. The main body of the plot recounts the Father's attempt in Madame Pace's brothel to seduce the Stepdaughter, whom he fails to recognize.

The characters attempt to persuade the singers and the Director to let them play themselves. Led by the Director, the professional singers at first resist, claiming that only they have that one necessity for performing opera: union cards. But as *Six Characters* goes on, the superior reality of the characters pushes their would-be representatives into the background. At the end, as both characters and singers abandon the stage, it is clear that it is the characters who have won the day, for they will be remembered, while the singers—and the Director too—will never be more than faceless performers.

It goes without saying that the recriminations, guilt, and hatreds that suffuse the opera are the very stuff of twentieth-century *Angst*; not surprisingly, they are the very stuff of opera itself. It is by no means the smallest achievement of *Six Characters* as a work for the lyric stage that it manages so completely to link the historical preoccupations of opera with the abiding psychological atmosphere of contemporary life and culture. On the philosophical level, the opera takes over, and deepens, Pirandello's lifelong concern with the inescapably nihilistic questioning of the metaphysical nature of reality.

It is true that for *Six Characters* to have succeeded as it has, it was necessary that its creators, and in particular its composer, be fully aware of the civilized culture that has gone into the making of the art of our century. Of all twentieth-century composers, Weisgall is one of the most intellectually and musically sophisticated. The son of a well-known Jewish cantor, he was born in 1912 in Czechoslovakia, and came to the United States in 1920. He has a Ph.D. in German literature from Johns Hopkins, and thereafter graduated from the Curtis Intitute of Music. He served in World War II as assistant military attaché to governments-in-exile in London, and after the war was cultural attaché in Prague. He has taught at Juilliard and at Queens College, and for many years has been on the faculty of the Jewish Theological Seminary. In a fitting recognition of the respect in which he is held in our intellectual life, he is now President of the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters.

One must not overlook for a moment that it is music, and only music, that has made *Six Characters* the artistic miracle that it undoubtedly is. First and foremost, Hugo Weisgall is an extraordinary musician, with an easy command of all the literature and materials of music. As a musician, he is known primarily for his operas, a long string of which constitute the largest single contribution in the history of American opera. His works before *Six Characters* include *The Tenor*, written in 1949-50 to a libretto based upon Wedekind, and *The Stronger*, written in 1952 to a libretto based upon Strindberg. His later works include *Purgatory* (1958, after Yeats), *Athaliah* (1963, after Racine), *Nine Rivers from Jordan* (1968, with Denis Johnston),

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Jenny, or The Hundred Nights (1976, John Hollander, after Mishima), and *Gardens of Adonis* (1959-81, John Olon-Scrymgeour, after André Obey and Shakespeare).

Most recently, Weisgall has been composing *Esther*, based on the biblical story. This opera was originally commissioned by the San Francisco Opera and its then-General Director, Terence McEwen. *Esther*'s production in San Francisco has now been canceled by the new General Director, Lotfi Mansouri, on the grounds that the work was too ambitious for San Francisco's resources.

While the rejection of *Esther* was publicly explained in terms of its casting requirements, there can be little doubt that the real cause of the San Francisco withdrawal was the *musical* demands Weisgall makes on performers and audience alike. He has always written—and *Six Characters* is certainly no exception—in a difficult style, harmonically knotty even though always clearly scored. His writing has often seemed post-Bergian, in its combination of a high level of chromaticism and what might be called the avoidance of the avoidance of tonality. What is so remarkable about Weisgall as an operatic composer is his ability to write music that both impresses solely as music, and at the same time mirrors the stage in a consistently uncanny way.

It is this combination of musical independence and dramatic relevance that so distinguishes *Six Characters*. In composing the opera, Weisgall drew on many sources: updated Gregorian chant, the nineteenth-century German synagogue service, early-twentieth-century Italian *verismo*, and Schoenbergian expressionism. Like Pirandello himself, whose original play has its roots in the life of the playwright's native Sicily, Weisgall draws on his entire artistic and human background to create his work.

The stature of the musical outcome of *Six Characters* is proven by one simple fact: unlike most American operas, and unlike almost all operas written since World War II, *Six Characters* contains vocal material—notably the arias for the Coloratura and the Stepdaughter in Act I—that can be excerpted from the opera, and performed independently in concert. What gives these arias their precious attribute of autonomous existence is sheer songfulness, extended, ripe, and memorable. Much the same thing can be said, too, about the immense power of the opera's end, with its gathering intensity of melody. Indeed, it is the profusion of melody, pleasurable to sing, play, and hear, that marks the entire score of *Six Characters*, and gives it its distinguished place among American operas.

For some years we have been hearing a great deal about "music-theater," a supposedly new fusion of song, word, and stage action that will replace opera as a creative force. The candidates for the successful achievement of this fusion have run the gamut from the 1976 Philip Glass/Robert Wilson *Einstein on the Beach* through the 1987 John Adams/Peter Sellars *Nixon in China*; hardier souls have even modeled their expectations—if not any realizations—on the ineffably tacky David Byrne and his Talking Heads.

But for all the provocations, genteel and often otherwise, that these supposed achievements have offered, their lack of musical value has doomed them to be no more than *pièces d'occasion*, works of no artistic value devised to exploit a particular moment in the chaotic history of the avant-garde and its life styles. For a real achievement in true music-theater, we must look to Weisgall's *Six Characters*, which manages at one and the same time to be a masterpiece in its independently existing music, and a masterpiece in its unity of sound and stage.

If Weisgall's work, by virtue of its excellence, does not belong to the present idea of music-theater, where, then, does it belong? The answer is simple: it belongs to the history of opera in general, and to the history of Italian opera in particular. I have earlier mentioned Weisgall's use of *verismo*—the unfettered musical and dramatic expression of the most bloody happenings of daily life—a kind of opera associated with, among others, Puccini, Leoncavallo, and Mascagni. Weisgall is

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also to be seen, surprisingly enough, in the tradition of Gian Carlo Menotti, whose *Amelia Goes to the Ball* (1937) was written when both Menotti and Weisgall were at Curtis. In his later *The Old Maid and the Thief* (1939), *The Medium* (1946), *The Telephone* (1947), and *The Consul* (1950), Menotti attempted exactly the linking of music and theater that has so inspired Weisgall; indeed, it is not too much to say that Weisgall, in his direct communication with the audience through musico-dramatic means, is the thinking man's Menotti. Above all, Weisgall, like Menotti, represents a hopeful development within the tradition beyond the operatic cul-de-sac symbolized by the vacant lushness of Puccini's *Turandot* (completed by Alfano after Puccini's death in 1924 and first produced in 1926), and by the huge scale of Berg's *Lulu* (1937).

The Chicago performance of *Six Characters*, judged by the broadcast, was replete with excellences. First-class young singers—in particular, baritone Robert Orth as the Father and soprano Elizabeth Byrne as the Stepdaughter—seemed comfortable with the challenging vocal lines. Rarity of rarities, the singers' English diction was uniformly excellent, something attested to by the quick response of the audience to the work's many subtle literary and musical witticisms. In the small orchestra, the wind and brass playing was splendid, though the strings, too few in number, seemed ill at ease, as did the conductor, Lee Schaenen. But any carping about the orchestra aside, the whole performance breathed a spirit of ensemble, of a company whose members were used to making opera performances with each other.

So far as Weisgall and his works are concerned, there are now two tasks urgently facing the world of American opera. The first task, and perhaps the easier of the two to accomplish, is a New York production of *Six Characters* staged by the New York City Opera, with all the resources that this talented company, so sadly under-employed in the recent past, can muster. Such a New York production would at the very least have the advantage of being able to provide a more representative sound in the vital string parts; it would also have the advantage of being able to draw on the pioneering experience of the Chicago production.

The second task facing American opera, hardly less important than a New York production of *Six Characters*, is a major company production of *Esther*, to take place as soon as possible after its now imminent completion. Despite what has been said officially in San Francisco about *Esther* and its difficulty, its musical requirements are no greater than those of, say, Berg's *Wozzeck* and *Lulu*; its production requirements are similarly within reach of any large opera house. To ask this much for Hugo Weisgall is not only to pay a debt of honor to this imperfectly appreciated master; it is to begin to attempt to fill in the historical record of American opera and of American music. We have the idea in this country that only Europe has great artistic traditions. We have the idea, too, that great art is no longer being created. *Six Characters in Search of an Author* shows that we have art in our past. It also shows us that we have a great artist living in our present. It is high time that those responsible for our operatic life recognize these facts, and act upon them.

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Theater

Chekhov at Yale

by Donald Lyons

For three-fourths of this century we got so poor and tired and lost all hope that many are now helpless and resigned, and sometimes we think only heaven's intervention can help us.
—A Chekhovian voice speaking of Russia

Anton Chekhov wrote *Ivanov*, his first produced full-length play, in the fall of 1887 when he was twenty-seven. As he says in a letter to his brother, "I wrote the play by chance, after a single conversation with Korsh [a friend who owned a theater in Moscow]. I took two weeks over it or, more truly, ten days." The Moscow premiere, as described by Chekhov to his brother, was a comedy of errors: he sat "in a tiny box like a prisoner's cell," and listened to the actors forget or reword almost all his lines. "Every word cuts me like a knife in my back. But—O Muse!—this act is also a success. . . . I am congratulated on the success." But he was disgusted by this facile éclat and extensively revised *Ivanov* for presentation in St. Petersburg, where it was triumphantly received at the Alexandrovsky Theater on January 31, 1889. It was not until October 1904 that the Moscow Art Theater produced this revised *Ivanov*, under the direction of Nemirovich-Danchenko. The Moscow Art Theater had, under cofounders Nemirovich-Danchenko and Stanislavsky, brought Chekhov's later masterpieces to the stage in the intervening years, but the playwright was not to see *Ivanov* in this setting. He had died of tuberculosis in the Black Forest on July 2. He was forty-four.

Chekhov's relationship to the Moscow Art Theater had become, of course, a complex symbiosis, with writer and producers alike seeking a fresh, organic, poetic sincerity and spontaneity that should be at once form (the Stanislavsky approach to playing) and content (the Chekhovian exaltation of little behavioral details and disdaining or "placing" of strain, rhetoric, and climax). The Moscow Art Theater made a famous and inordinately influential visit to the United States in 1923-24, performing *Ivanov* in New York in November 1923. They did the plays in Russian. *The New York World* singled out for praise Stanislavsky himself: ". . . as a lascivious and senile count enamored of a country-side widow, [he] did a beautiful piece of clowning in the manner of twenty years ago." One wonders if Stanislavsky, the acting revolutionary, relished this bouquet. Did Olivier enjoy being assimilated to Henry Irving, or Brando to Alfred Lunt? The company was seen as visitors from "the future"; and it was assumed they had come to teach us that drama must deal with the working class, must depict them in a naturalistic, introspective mode, and must end on a note of group uplift. These delusions (at least they were delusions to Chekhov and to anyone attending rigorously to what he wrote) were in the fullness of time to beget the Group Theater and the Actors' Studio, the main movements (along with, perhaps, Welles's Mercury Theater) in American theater from the Thirties through the Fifties. The prewar

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populist rhetoric of the Group yielded naturally to the psychological intensities of the Studio in the postwar period.

When to this background it is added that apparently the first production of Chekhov of any kind in this country was a student performance at Yale in 1908 of *The Cherry Garden* (as its translator, a Yale instructor in Russian, called it), it will be granted that unusual interest and appropriateness attach to the recent Yale Repertory Theater presentation of *Ivanov* in an adaptation by and under the direction of Oleg Yefremov, Artistic Director of the Moscow Art Theater. Mr. Yefremov's version of *Ivanov* has been in repertory in Moscow for fifteen years.

What has the heir of Chekhov's intimate collaborators and fellow spirits made of this early, and largely misprized, play? Maybe one should ask first *how* Mr. Yefremov has managed to transplant his work here. He speaks no English and communicated through translators to an American cast pre-selected by, one supposes, Lloyd Richards, the Artistic Director of the Yale Rep. And there was a certain sense through the evening that the actors were left on their own for line readings, whilst at the same time they were being tugged irresistibly and visibly by the play's deep currents in a coherent direction. There *were* problems of inconcinnity, of (especially in the comic roles) virtuosic hamming, of failure of pitch, but they were minor problems, a few wrong notes on the cello that is played so poignantly in *Ivanov*. On the whole, *Ivanov* at Yale was a beautiful and moving reading of an extraordinary play.

Mr. Yefremov has "adapted" Chekhov's text to the small but telling extent of opening with a full gathering of the local society (we are in a province of Central Russia); some fifteen people gathered at a neighbor of Ivanov's talk about him. This scene occurs later in Chekhov, after we have been introduced to the Ivanov household, but its reshuffle hither is a happy stroke, for it renders incarnate the society that has made Ivanov what he is, as well as bookending neatly with the next full assemblage, which surrounds the final tragedy. This is a world of debilitating and numbing triviality, awake only to food, drink, money, and cards. And to malicious gossip about Ivanov.

Mr. Yefremov confines the whole action to one set: a gray, stained, mottled, colonnaded, neoclassical villa façade (with a right-angled continuation of that in a minor, back-door key). This looming presence serves for neighbors' and for Ivanov's residence. The whole main stage is bare, a naked space at once indoors and outdoors, climatic and psychic, full of leaves and of longing. Sharp geometries of light (circles to be paced and quartered and argued from the radii of; a wavering candle in a darkness of despair) will demarcate this space. A few stark props (a big pillow, an iron chair), shocking in their materiality, will possess the gripped ferocity of a bullfighter's cape and sword. And let me quickly add that all this *mise en scène* can yield hilarity at least as readily as gloom under Mr. Yefremov's touch. The set was by David Borovsky, from Moscow; the lighting was by Geoff Korf, an obviously promising Yale School of Drama student.

As the play opens, Sasha, high-strung daughter of the prosperous Lebedev neighbors (greedy mother who has lent Ivanov money; easygoing, drunkard father), defends Ivanov from various grotesque libels —she is romantically fixated upon Ivanov —and turns in angry exasperation on the menfolk to ask them to do or say *one* funny or novel or original or daring thing, anything to awaken her admiration and palliate her boredom. A young woman, stalled in her vitality, demanding novelty from a dull, dead, malicious circle—I thought, not for the last time in contemplating Chekhov, of Jane Austen, specifically of Emma Woodhouse edgily insisting on amusement at Box Hill ("There was a languor, a want of spirits, a want of union . . ."). The Regency novelist and the Russian have similar insights into the misdirections of a neurotic frustratedness.

Nikolai Ivanov is a gentleman farmer of thirty-five, an exhausted idealist who came to the country a few years back, after studying at Moscow University, with high plans for

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agricultural, educational, and political reform (details here left a bit sketchy both because they were not the point and because of the czarist censorship) but who has recently, within the year, run his land into debt and his soul into torpor and loneliness. Ivanov has indeed one of the fullest dossiers of any of Chekhov's characters; not only is he mercilessly and continually articulate about himself, but Chekhov, in a famous letter to Suvorin, composed a rich psychological profile of the man that expands on the data of the play. His emotional life is a tormented mess: he is married to Anna, née Sarah, a Jewish woman whose marriage to Ivanov and subsequent conversion have caused her to be disowned by her parents. Anna is a wan melancholic, dying (though she does not know it) of tuberculosis. Her husband, guiltily oppressed by her company, flees nightly to the insipid bonhomie and romantic hero-worship he knows he can find at the Lebedevs'. Anna figures in two *coups de théâtre* that close acts II and III (critics, including Nabokov, find such act-ending coups evidence of Chekhov's dramaturgical immaturity—I see in them a slap-dash vigor perhaps a bit wanting later on). When she comes upon Ivanov and Sasha kissing, he starts back horrified, crying, "Sarah!" And when later she taxes Ivanov with never having loved her and with being unfaithful, he irritatedly blurts out, "You kike!" and tells her she is dying. Anna has been a haunted, accusing figure forever receding into the dark or spectrally gliding about in the glow of a single candle; and it is his treatment of her that alienates audiences from Ivanov (as it did at Yale). But Ivanov's sins are of the surface: he did not marry Anna for money; he married her for love and in defiance of the pervasive Russian anti-Semitism (the young Chekhov had witnessed the deportation of twenty thousand Jews from Moscow and did not take anti-Semitism lightly). Ivanov has fallen out of love and is ashamed; he is stricken with remorse at the expression his anger receives; he has in fact not been unfaithful with Sasha, although his dalliances with her do amount to infidelity in a moral sense. Anna dies between acts III and IV. In one sense (a cruel one, to be sure) Ivanov's self-detachment from Anna has been a reaching toward life, an itch to breathe again. But he also knows better—not so much about Sasha as about himself. When she jokingly suggests they run away to America, he answers he hasn't the energy to get to the door. But the seesaw of illusion soon dips again, and a few minutes later he is embracing her with rapture: "My joy, my happiness, my youth! I'll live again! I'll work!" That's when Anna surprises them.

In his first soliloquy in the next act, Ivanov remembers his recent salad days and "the charm and poetry of those quiet nights when you sit at your desk working from sunset till dawn, or just sit and muse and dream." He contrasts those active times with the dispirited nothingness of his todays. He tries to drive Sasha into a more life-affirming choice: "When you start reforming me, your face looks so naïve. Why not be the wife of a strong man rather than the nurse of a weak one? . . . You're causing the race to degenerate. What would Darwin say?" But Sasha persists in her masochistic devotedness (articulating it very much along the lines of Julia in Byron's *Don Juan*: "'Tis woman's whole existence"). The staging here is at its most erotically involving as Sasha nuzzles Ivanov on the great pillow like a mother bear.

The last act is the marriage of Ivanov and Sasha, which becomes a riotously lachrymose event with bride, bride's mother, and two comic-relief elderly lovers all bawling in a circle and Ivanov indulging in fresh paroxysms of self-loathing ("The birds and the trees sang with laughter at me . . ." etc.) while sitting in a garden chair and grabbing onto an uncomprehending Lebedev in a desperate, at once ridiculous and heartbreaking, plea for understanding.

Ivanov is often treated (as he was in reviews of this production) as yet another avatar of the "superfluous man" so frequent in nineteenth-century Russian literature, as in, for example, Pushkin's *Onegin*, in Lermontov, in Goncharov, and in minor Turgenev. But it is precisely Ivanov's distinction to be some-

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thing finer, nobler than men in that mold. He constantly gets the joke of himself as Hamlet, or as the Byronic sufferer Manfred, or as the superfluous man. He is rather the wreck of an accomplished mind and a generous heart who has come to bear a humiliating resemblance to those idle poseurs. His whining arias are *about* their own tedious absurdity. He is a Hamlet who has cleaned up Denmark only to find it more rotten than ever and who has with equal misery endured a marriage to Ophelia and a wooing by, say, Miranda. In the filiation of Russian literature, he is a Levin who has come to despair of the efficacy of zemstvo reform and of the holiness of the peasantry and of love for Kitty or for anyone else.

This is perhaps the place to note the wealth of literary, and particularly dramatic, allusions that mark this early play. Too few critics have sought to situate Chekhov in the history of the Russian theater. Indeed, until Simon Karlinsky's invaluable *Russian Drama from Its Beginnings to the Age of Pushkin* (1985), Russian-less readers were all but unable to do so. And even Professor Karlinsky stops at Pushkin, although he does treat at satisfying length a key play mentioned in *Ivanov*, Alexander Griboedov's 1825 comedy *The Misfortune of Being Clever*, in which young nobleman Chatsky, an unstoppably glib social critic, talks love away. In *Ivanov*, it is the traditional cynic Shabyelsky, uncle of Ivanov (given to laugh-getters like, "Doctors are even worse than lawyers; lawyers just rob you; doctors rob you and kill you too"), who compares himself to Chatsky. And Lebedev, Sasha's father, mentions the other great nineteenth-century Russian comedy, Gogol's *The Inspector*. With true Gogolian eccentricity, Lebedev remembers the rats who, in a dream, sniff and then disdainfully run away. (Both these plays, the former called *Chatsky*, are in Penguin's *Four Russian Plays*.) And Sasha throughout expects, like Emma Bovary, that life will be like a novel. Chekhov was preternaturally alert to the ways idealized abstractions can falsify life. A fool can misuse healthy literature. A self-indulgent addict can use corrupt literature (like the mid-nineteenth-century melodramas of Alexander Ostrovsky) to perpetuate unhealthy living. Chekhov was insistent, especially in *Ivanov*, on the difference between "literature" and life. As he wrote to his brother about this play, "Contemporary dramatists stuff their plays with angels, scoundrels, and fools exclusively. . . . I wanted to be an original and not bring in a single villain, or a single angel (although I couldn't keep out the fools)."

The closest thing to a scoundrel in *Ivanov* is Dr. Lvov, who is solicitously attending Anna and who has constituted himself a vociferously righteous critic of Ivanov, in whose behavior he can see only egoism and cruelty and greed. "How I hate this Tartuffe," he remarks to the audience, blurring life and the page yet again. Lvov is wont brutally to tell people just what he thinks of them—his famous honesty. While sympathetic characters like Sasha ("He can't ask for a glass of water without letting you know how honest he is") and the Uncle revile Lvov, it is Ivanov who likes him and keeps trying to treat him as a human being. But Lvov, setting himself up as the custodian of Anna's interests (a situation the romantic-cliché possibilities of which are not lost on the Uncle), persists in seeing Ivanov through the belittling lens of his reductivist ideology. Ivanov, Lvov is sure, wants to kill Anna and marry Sasha for her money, and there's an end of it. Lvov is the physician as puritanical materialist, reading character as correct or incorrect, largely according to its perceived economic basis. And offending Lvov's notion of right is enough to provoke him to rage and mortal combat. With Anna dead, he opens the last act with a declaration of intention to "expose" Ivanov. At the end of the act, challenging Ivanov to a duel, he precipitates in his antagonist a last spasm of self-disgust and an acted-upon impulse to suicide. Chekhov saw Lvov as a "walking cliché" but refused to caricature him; his pain and anger are, if monotonous, certainly disinterested and sincere. But if Lvov is not a formula villain, he is something more ominous—a portent of things to come. He is the

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man of "science" as mechanistic classifier of people into "good" or "bad," coupled with a fanatical determination to extirpate the "bad." The Uncle compares Lvov to Dobrolyubov, a tyrannical literary critic of the midcentury who shrilly insisted that all literature must plot the overthrow of the regime and that all writers must live as destroyers, as nihilistic prophets of revolution. Telling of his contemptuous treatment of poor Turgenev, Isaiah Berlin calls Dobrolyubov "worthy of Lenin" and "the most Bolshevik temperament of all the early radicals." With characteristically calm insight, Chekhov saw where the Dobrolyubovs/Lvovs were headed. As Simon Karlinsky remarks in his introduction to Chekhov's letters, "Chekhov almost alone seemed to realize that men who fight tyranny and oppression by using tyrannical and oppressive means and who pursue their goals with ruthless and single-minded fanaticism are not likely to further the cause of freedom and bring about democracy in literature or any other area." It is even more characteristic of Chekhov that he should have seen the darkest possibilities in a personage so close to himself—in a busybody doctor. As Professor Karlinsky reminds us, Dr. Chekhov's was not a life of Proustian—or even Tolstoyan—detachment or of Austen-like ataraxia: "His life was one continuous round of alleviating famine, fighting epidemics, building schools and public roads, endowing libraries, helping organize marine-biology laboratories, giving thousands of peasants free medical treatment," and so on. He was in every way an ornament (Nabokov's father was another) of that remarkable and underheralded flowering of civic and cultural reform that marked the last decades of the rickety czar regime.

Yes, *Ivanov* has its crudities of dramaturgy and its tautologies of characterization. It is, like its eponymous hero, difficult to love. But the Yefremov production at Yale has proved the effort to be worth making. Mr. Yefremov is superb at clarifying the tugs of emotion, the lines of force in the play; we always know how the characters feel about themselves and others by their placement or comportment; we know where they stand. And yet these schemes are never abstractly reductive: as the people prowl the edges tigerlike or trudge forlornly around a circle or sprawl spent on that huge pillow, they seem clarified by the directorial style and not entrapped in some Beckettian artifice. Mr. Yefremov's direction in fact rather recalls to an American eye the confrontational patternings so dear to Elia Kazan, though in a less jangled, hopped-up key. Chekhov's cello versus Williams's jazz.

In general, the comic performers in *Ivanov* tended to unrestraint in delivery and to a generally excessive begging-for-a-laugh. It is a welcome failing in a Chekhov production, but a failing nonetheless. Austin Pendleton as Lebedev and Joyce Van Patten as a local widow were especially culpable here, while Lee Richardson's cynical Uncle showed the virtue of classical restraint, effortlessly bowling every laugh for a strike. Frances Conroy's Anna struck the right note of bewildered vagueness (this was, by the way, Vivien Leigh's last New York stage role, in 1966, and one can readily picture her in it, although picturing her co-star John Gielgud as Ivanov is a bit harder). Mary Mara as Sasha stresses the young woman's restless querulousness at the expense of her freshness and charm; on the whole, it's a loss, though she does rise to that passionate scene on the pillow. The Dr. Lvov, Zeljko Ivanek, was weak, but it must be admitted that this is a role stronger in conception than in the actual writing.

The keystone of a good *Ivanov* must be Ivanov, who was played by William Hurt in a performance of real courage and daring. This is an actor who specializes in quicksilver shifts from charm to exploitativeness to a lacerating self-questioning. All this Mr. Hurt used to the fullest, but he did more—he risked being thought a fool and a bore by a generous abandonment of himself to all the qualities, savory and unsavory, of the man. But the abandonment was always within the bounds of art; there was no sense of private indulgence, but rather a feel, as he twisted and writhed and stalked and clung, of a soul anatomized and hung out. If this is not

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Ivanov, what is? He was, be it noted, criticized in the *Times* for those Method mannerisms it is his distinction here to have entirely avoided. He seems rather here to revert, maybe unconsciously, to an earlier style of rhetorical performance—say, that of Fredric March. It struck me as a great performance, and one that shone a light of comprehension into the murk of a difficult character.

Mr. Yefremov lucidly gives us the play both as an artifact of 1889 and as an eternal human document. What is missing, perhaps, is *Ivanov* as it might relate to the Russia of 1975, when Mr. Yefremov originated the production, or to the Russia of 1990. Not that one would have wanted a lacquering of glib topicality applied to Chekhov. Quite the contrary. One respects the absence of that element. And certainly it might have been too difficult in 1975, as it might be too raw in 1990, to bring an overtly contemporary focus to the play. But it is impossible at this play, at anything of Chekhov's, not to be aware of its terrible urgency. It could quite literally have been written by a Russian (who, by some miracle, was Chekhov) yesterday.

Ivanov is closest in achievement, perhaps, to *Uncle Vanya* of the later plays, especially in centering on burnt-out men. Dr. Astrov in *Vanya* is both an antithesis to Dr. Lvov in *Ivanov* and a development of the more benign aspects of Ivanov himself. Astrov speaks wrenchingly of the destruction of the Russian countryside: "It's an unmistakable picture of gradual decay . . . . You may say that it is the influence of civilization, that the old way of life naturally had to give place to the new. Yes, and I would agree—if on the site of these ruined forests there were now roads and railways, if there workshops, and factories, and schools. Then the people would have been healthier, better off, and better educated—but there's nothing of the sort here! There are still the same swamps and mosquitoes, the same absence of roads, and the dire poverty, and typhus, and diphtheria, and fires. Here we have a picture of decay . . . caused by inertia, by ignorance, by utter irresponsibility." The other day Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, in an article in *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, lamented that "we have spoiled the perimeters of our cities, poisoned our rivers, lakes and fish . . . . Today we are finally spoiling the last remaining water, air and soil with the additives of atomic death . . . . For three-fourths of this century we got so poor and tired and lost all hope that many are now helpless and resigned, and sometimes we think only heaven's intervention can help us. . . . Everything is terrible in our economy . . . . There is no one to grow wheat for bread, no one to take care of cattle. Millions are living in conditions that cannot be called dwellings, and they spend decades in stinking hovels. The elderly and invalids are poor as beggars. Roads are in terrible condition, and nature itself is taking revenge." Granted that Astrov is a "placed" character while the author of the *Pravda* piece was speaking *in propria persona*, the tolerantly elegiac Chekhov and the fulminating Jeremiah Solzhenitsyn prove to have a large community of sensibility, and not just because they both have a ruined country to mourn. Solzhenitsyn, of course, has a far more total and tragic ruin before him than ever Chekhov did; and his hard and hard-bought rigors certainly sound more limited notes than did Chekhov's art (although Solzhenitsyn's novels do have a moral suppleness and surprisingness that belie his reputation and that very well may owe something to Chekhov). Solzhenitsyn's is perhaps on the whole, though, rather a late-Tolstoyan kind of witness.

As a century closes that has been so immeasurably enriched by Russian exiles like Nabokov and Balanchine and Stravinsky and by the slaughtered artists *in* Russia like Babel and Mandelstam and—where to stop?—there is, for Russia as for its sometime-twin-in-evil Germany, a seeming chance for a new beginning. For all Russia's horrors, she has produced a choir of moral voices unsurpassed on earth. Russia, and all of us, cannot do better than to listen to them now. The *Times* critic, in a largely dismissive notice of *Ivanov*, refers to "our age of Gorbachev." It would profit us much more to think of it as the age of Solzhenitsyn and of Sakharov . . . and of Chekhov.

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Art

New York stories

by Jed Perl

At the end of August, I went over to the Museum of Modern Art for a last look at "Matisse in Morocco." This perfect, small-scaled show, with its unearthly combination of the voluptuous and the severe, was still pulling in the crowds. Matisse's mostly thinly painted portraits of dusky men and women in bright, loose-fitting clothes are a distillation of many traditions—the Byzantine, the Asian, the nineteenth-century Romanticism of France—and they had become a magnet for people from around the world. The museums of Barcelona and London, where I'd been a few weeks before, could not boast an exhibition of this quality, or an audience so attuned to the glamour of a great show. Of course, a good number of the people at the Modern were Europeans, here to take advantage of a sinking dollar. But it was to New York that they had all come, and there was nothing that they could tell the New York gals in short-short skirts and the New York guys in knee-length bermudas about throw-away elegance. The scene in the museum's glass-enclosed lobby was as terrific-looking as on the opening night of the Warhol show, only this wasn't opening night, it was an ordinary Thursday afternoon, and the magnet wasn't our master hype-artist, it was Matisse working his miracles. There was no better point at which to re-enter New York; but there was also something a little unnerving about the blooming health of the scene at the Modern, because everybody one talked to at the beginning of the season was telling a different story, a story of stagnation and hard times.

With New York City—and the entire country—in the midst of a deepening financial crisis, people involved in a luxury trade like the art business could not but feel that the foundations were being pulled out from under them. While *Cover*, a downtown magazine, observed that "The big summer shakeout of gallery closings everyone predicted didn't come true," everyone seemed convinced that the half dozen or so closings that *had* taken place were only the beginning. (And as the weeks passed, one learned about more and more.) That some of the galleries that closed never exactly seemed open in the first place didn't reassure many people. Nor were people reassured by the fact that the spring season had ended with a burst of openings —it was pointed out that this did not so much involve new galleries as old galleries moving to bigger newer spaces. Mary Boone, it was said, had nearly gone broke; and although one never knows quite what to think of what gallery owners say about business, they were uniform in saying that it was flat, dead, nonexistent. The boom had gone bust.

For the many artists who never reaped the benefits of boom times—and they include many of the best artists alive—trouble in the galleries could be called other people's trouble. There might be comfort in the thought that hard times eliminate some of the hell-raising frivolity of a scene—some of

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the clown artists, like Mike Bidlo, whose knock-offs of paintings by Picasso defied all reason by earning him a show at Castelli. But the crash will not necessarily benefit the underdogs. Far from it. Considering that the mechanisms by which taste is formed are in the hands of the people who have the most to lose in an economic collapse, hard times may set off a strenuous effort to preserve the aesthetic status quo. Now that the arc of the 1980s art world is on a steep downward path, the coalition of big money, star personalities, and nouvelle bohemia that characterized the passage from the East Village to SoHo has lost its easy confidence but not its will to survive. Indeed, no one can tell this community anything about survival: it goes about its business amidst the ever-expanding tragedy of AIDS, which touches most everybody in the deepest and most agonizing ways imaginable. When terrible deaths have become an everyday occurrence, it is difficult to say what meaning the many "FOR RENT" signs in the store windows and the jitters in the backrooms at the galleries can possibly have, except that they are some small addition to an incalculable sorrow.

This is a community tried beyond imagining. And as every day brings more deaths, more bad financial news, more reports of censorship in the heartland, it would be good if New Yorkers could look to art—not, of course, for answers to life, but as a value that gives value to life. Yet how can people expect miracles from art, when they have spent most of the past decade exalting art as irony, as a parody of itself, as a comment on its own conditions? After years when art was mostly thought of in terms of commodification and deconstruction, transcendence cannot so easily be called back. Art as art, art inside art: these are not so easily recovered. Perhaps this is why this past September the very people who had made SoHo a tourist legend around the world looked spooked. Sex, politics, and glamour—the old equations—were insisted upon as never before, only all the conviction was gone.

A goodly percentage of the SoHo galleries I went into in September had, at the front desk, signs urging people to give to the U.S. Senate campaign of Harvey Gantt, who was running against Jesse Helms in North Carolina: the preaddressed envelopes were right there next to the signs. These displays could be seen in all kinds of galleries, they in no way detracted from what was going on on the walls, and they struck me as a quite natural response to what in the art world is a generally perceived crisis in public attitudes toward the artist—a crisis that may stem from the NEA controversy but has now moved into the far more troubling area of censorship of both museum art and popular art. I also thought that the P.P.O.W. Gallery had done the right thing by giving over its space to a group of AIDS activists known as The Lazaretto. A gallery turned into an AIDS horror show—with first-person stories of illness and abuse scrawled on the walls, and a grisly tableau of agony, greed and death at the end—may not be an artistic statement, but when the show concludes with tables laden with public-health information, it is certainly a community statement. An unsigned notice in *The New Yorker* observed that this was "an exhibition that should be in a public space." But why? Why shouldn't New York's private galleries take out time to speak of and to the people who made them what they are?

I do not agree with those who believe that political activism is never appropriate in an art gallery. Political activity goes on everywhere, and why not in a gallery? Which is not to say that politics in a gallery is a substitute for art in a gallery. A lot of people in the art world have willfully obfuscated or denied the difference between political statements and artistic statements. And if there is a hollow feeling in the galleries in SoHo, it has a good deal to do with all the statements—fashion statements, political statements—that have been tricked up to look like works of art. At Luhring Augustine, the first thing one saw on entering the Larry Clark show was a notice on the wall, warning one that some of this might be inappropriate for minors. Such a notice was an act of consideration for the public, which nowadays includes many adults with kids in backpacks and strollers;

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but it was also, I think, a bit of a come-on. Half of the show consisted of Larry Clark's photographs of adolescent sex and drug addiction. These black-and-white shots (some of which date back to the 1960s and were sold at the Witkin Gallery in the 1970s) show us a tacky underworld of needles and hard-ons. Clark's work here gives us the lowdown on a casually self-destructive way of life. I believe that these photographs are a small, honest achievement. Unfortunately, it's an achievement that wasn't left to stand alone in this show. At Luhring Augustine the black-and-white photographs were interspersed with Clark's more recent works: large collages, exhibited under glass, which often make use of pages from gay porn magazines, pin-ups of teen stars such as Matt Dillon, and autobiographical memorabilia, such as a letter that Clark received from an art dealer who'd paid him a studio visit. The collages are undigested imagery—pages torn from the life—and they present a great deal of X-rated stuff flat out. Clark's earlier work, in a documentary tradition, invited us to react to a milieu that has its own logic. The earlier work offered a frame for certain experiences, however debased those experiences might be. The new work just dumps on us.

A lot of the sexual and political attitudinizing in the galleries is little more than a cover for a paucity of invention and inspiration. The show at Stux by the artist Cary Leibowitz, who also goes by the name Candyass, consisted of Jenny Holzer-style sloganeering imprinted on college pennants, cardboard boxes, rugs, and other surfaces. Slogans such as "LOVE SUCKS" and "DROP DEAD" are not, aside from anything else, exactly newsworthy in the SoHo of 1990. But the exhibition handout was a new ultimate in attitudinizing: a wall calendar on which every month was September (the month of, we were told, "Virgin Mary's birthday/Cary S. Leibowitz's birthday/Candyass opening at Stux") and was illustrated with a different shot of the artist in the buff (vacuuming, telephoning, masturbating). Stux, the gallery that last winter provided New York with a show of the silly, contrived work of Andres Serrano, sometimes looks more like a parody of the Zeitgeist than a leader of the pack. But even when one has the feeling that the Stux clientele mistakes too much for just enough . . . well, this is the archetypal late-Eighties clientele, and I don't imagine they have any trouble understanding why, even as Cary Liebowitz's calendar (hand-signed, no less) was sitting on the front desk, Stux was announcing the opening of a new venture one floor down, Stux Modern. Stux Modern is billed as selling "modern masterworks," and was beginning in October with a show of Abstract Expressionists. In going into the secondary market, Stux is doing what all the shock troopers are doing these days. It's a sort of two-step—*épater/glorifier*—that was perhaps pioneered by Tony Shafrazi, who launched his career by defacing Picasso's *Guernica* at MOMA with a can of spray paint and is now apotheosizing "American Artists of the '80s" in an elaborately produced catalogue with a gold-toned cover. These dealers begin by marketing something they imagine is revolutionary and end by marketing the same thing as something they imagine is a classic. Shafrazi's Eighties show—called "The Last Decade"—was so stuffy and subdued, it would look at home in a corporate lobby. I come back to where I began, with the paucity of invention and inspiration. David Salle, Peter Halley, Keith Haring, and the rest of them have gone from new kids on the block to vintage products on the auction block without ever engaging us. One can take the attitude of an outlaw or the attitude of an old master, but where's the art in all of it?

The art is in the deal, and Kirk Varnedoe, Director of the Department of Painting and Sculpture at the Modern, showed that he can deal with the best of them when he announced, on September 12, that he had hired Robert Storr to be a curator in his department, with "primary responsibility for contemporary art." Over the summer, Varnedoe had shown the dealer's hand overly much, when he made some moves in the direction of hiring Jeffrey Deitch, a dealer—literally a dealer—who made a name for himself running Citibank's art advisory service.

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Storr, who's forty, has appropriate credentials: he's a much-published critic as well as an artist (though I don't know if he's ever exhibited), he's organized shows, written books, and has been deeply involved in recent years in the College Art Association, the professional group for art historians and artists. In the *Times* article that reported on the appointment, the impression was given, mostly by Storr, that he had driven a hard bargain with the Modern, turning down the job a year ago, and taking it now only when it was his "perception that there's a real desire to do something now, and there are spaces and resources available that may not have been there before . . . I'm willing to move into this institutional thing because if as a critic you complain for years that things should be different and somebody gives you a chance to change them, then you should try." Perhaps Storr's appointment is a sign that the Modern is going to reverse its oft-criticized reluctance to give much space to the contemporary scene. But Storr is a boy of the Zeitgeist, and unless he is about to do a dramatic about-face, the contemporary scene we will be seeing at the Modern will be the same empty shell that we're seeing this fall in SoHo. When Robert Storr isn't promoting political gestures, he's promoting market-driven ideas of historical progression. Last winter, he was instrumental in organizing the artist's panels for the College Art Association's annual meeting, and of the dozens of panels, only one, so far as I can recall, was about painting or sculpture—about the matter of art. As a professional organization, the CAA is an entirely appropriate forum for the discussion of matters such as job discrimination and the difficulties of opening up the educational process to more and different people; but when, as in the roster of sessions that Storr helped to organize, the matter of art becomes buried in the factional ideologies, there is nothing left to have a CAA about except self-interest. So Storr will give the Modern some credibility with the art-equals-politics crowd, even as he continues the main thrust of his writing, which has been to give the look of historical credibility to some of the high-visibility art of the Eighties. In 1986, Storr published a monograph on Philip Guston—an artist of an earlier generation whose posthumous apotheosis has everything to do with proving that there isn't much difference between a great late style and an R. Crumb cartoon. This is a point that is very pressing just now, as the works of Keith Haring, Kenny Scharf, and a lot of other cartoonists in oil-on-linen wait in line for their place in the history of modern art that Alfred Barr began a half-century ago.

Enough of the bad news. September was a month when there were some good gallery shows to be seen. The Borgenicht Gallery presented an aptly titled "Still Life Anthology," and Robert Birmelin exhibited recent paintings at Claude Bernard.

The Borgenicht show was a perfect beginning-of-season compilation: it provoked thought without forcing us to premature conclusions. There were works by classic moderns, including Balthus, Derain, Giacometti, Gris, Morandi; and works by contemporaries, including Rita Baragona, Leland Bell, Temma Bell, Nell Blaine, Warren Brandt, Susan Daykin, Jane Freilicher, Louisa Matthiasdottir, and Billy Sullivan. The show gave artists in their forties a chance to see their work hanging next to artists who had inspired them; and this can be an enlarging experience, both for the artists and the audience. (But why, I wonder, does it fall to a dealer who has been in business for four decades to grant a little visibility on Fifth Avenue to some gifted artists of a younger generation? We expect nothing less than independent thinking from Grace Borgenicht—she is, after all, the woman who showed Ilya Bolotowsky's Neoplastic paintings during the long years when Ab Ex was all anyone wanted to know from. But what long-run hope is there for today's forty-year-olds, if there are no forty-year-old dealers to follow in Borgenicht's footsteps?) It was particularly interesting to see a flower painting by Nell Blaine, the dean of American flower painters, next to one by Rita Baragona, the

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most gifted flower painter of the next generation. Both of these painterly realists are attuned to the tiltings and turnings of petal and leaf—it's through these movements that they create their dances of fluid color planes. Blaine's *Pink Dahlia* is an upbeat dance—the flowers, in shrieking colors, do the hoola and the twist. Baragona's *Impatiens in a Night Window* is, by contrast, rather somber, a delicate country minuet, with the dancers in cool shades of pink and green and blue all absorbed in their small, refined gestures.

Group shows allow us to dip into careers, and they tell their happy stories, and also their sad ones. Susan Daykin's contribution to "Still Life Anthology," *Tea Party*, evinced none of what I think of as this artist's gifts, so that it was only after I'd been through the show and walked right by Daykin's contribution that I looked around a second time and realized that the art-schoolly composition of colored bands and flattened-out domestic ware was actually by Daykin. A decade ago, in a series of triptychs based on events in Mexican history and literature, Daykin's riot of color, dazzle of detail, and big, sweeping movements struck some of her admirers—among whom I include myself—as signaling the appearance of a sort of American Delacroix. Daykin wove together a passionate interest in the folkloric tradition and an instinctual grasp of the conventions of School of Paris painting. The synthesis was so sophisticated as to perhaps place her beyond the comprehension of the average gallery goer. (Among the small clutch of people who were excited by Daykin's work was John Ashbery, who published a few words about her during his last years of regular reviewing.) Daykin was still a painter to be reckoned with a few years later, in 1985, when she radically simplified her art and painted a series of female torsos covered with an impasto of strange tattoos. These canvases, which were also inspired by Mexico, in this case the work of Frida Kahlo, were a woman's cry—a feminist howl—and they were just about the best iconic works produced at that time. But there was something troublesome about the torsos, too. For Daykin the impulse to reduce was an Expressionist impulse. What was missing was a sense that reduced structures need to have an inherent logic. From the evidence of the few post-1985 works of hers I've seen, Daykin seems to have gotten around to imagining that every reduction expresses something. This is a conventional contemporary misapprehension of abstract art. Now Daykin's work is just . . . cute: empty gestures and over-obvious textural effects. How or why a brilliant, seemingly authoritative artist loses sight of her gifts, I don't know. I only hope that the turn is not irrevocable, that it is not too late in the day for Daykin to go back and finish the important unfinished work.

The happy story here is of Louisa Matthiasdottir, who, now into her seventies, keeps adding chapters to her extraordinary exploration of the art of the still life. This time, two tomatoes, two cucumbers, two green squash, two yellow squash, a black iron pot, a black spatula, and a white cloth are arrayed on a brown table top. The format is broadly horizontal—at 36 x 68 inches, it's almost a double square. The light is clear, yet with a few dark gray shadows moving across the walls that surround the table. This painting hits you all at once, in a dazzle of whiteness and darkness and fully weighted color. It has the all-in-oneness that is a hallmark of a late formalist style, without the sense of diminishment that turns most late formalist styles—like that of Ellsworth Kelly—into bland exercises. In this painting, as in the great still life with a brown pitcher that was in her last one-woman show, Matthiasdottir has left behind the intricately inward-turning movements that are characteristic of French still-life painting. Her objects, splayed across the table, insist on their individuality. She uses these objects to create a series of rather abrupt gestures that activate and map the space without delimiting it. There's a tension between parts, and no easy convergence. This is age-of-anxiety domesticity. This is an aggressively modern painting—it feels as up to date as one of those Kellys. Yet the reductiveness involves no loss. Matthiasdottir is a dazzling modern formalist—our premier

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analyst of still-life conventions—and she can put in all the incidentals, too.

Matthiasdottir's still lifes are pure painting: one cannot imagine their meanings being conveyed through any other medium. By comparison, the stories that Robert Birmelin relates in his paintings of the streets of contemporary New York City are familiar from a number of different art forms. We have seen this same, violent world in novels like Tom Wolfe's *Bonfire of the Vanities*, and movies like last year's noirish police thriller, starring Al Pacino, *Sea of Love*. I have heard people say of Birmelin's show at Claude Bernard, "I'd rather go to the movies." I understand the attitude, although I don't agree. I like the way Birmelin documents our unruly times in paint on canvas. We cannot avoid the violence of the streets: the tragedies of the homeless and the drug plague have been thrust into the forefront of our consciousness, and Birmelin gets it all down with an admirable lucidity. This work doesn't offer the irreducible pleasures of painting-inside-painting; but it involves considerable painting culture, and it clarifies current events in a way that has a vigor of its own.

Donald Kuspit has called Birmelin's paintings "case histories of the city's street life." That's apt. It's also apt to point out that these paintings show us the city's "kneecaps. The city is down on its knees in these pictures, not because it is praying for mercy, but because it doesn't know what it is to stand upright." These horizontal paintings show us what Boccioni might have seen if he'd been in New York in 1990. Everything is whizzing, zooming movements. Look in one spot and you're confronted by a tightly rendered hand, or leg, or overflowing garbage can. From there you lunge backward to a shop façade or the top of a skyscraper; or you're stopped by another figure or fragment of a figure, that seems to have flashed —blurred, immaterial—in front of the thing you were looking at at first. These movements don't ever exactly add up; there's no rhythm that carries you through a whole painting. And the juxtaposition of tightly rendered areas and dissolving areas gives a dissonant, creepily surreal feeling to these anarchic streets. There are moments when the work recalls Tchelitchew, moments when it recalls Reginald Marsh. Those aren't my favorite artists. And yet Birmelin's work has a cumulative force.

Birmelin's color is jarringly literal. His people wear cheapo clothes in shrill colors —they must have bought these costumes in the discount shops on Fourteenth Street. Birmelin's beer cans and wine bottles are color-photo perfect. This color doesn't add up as color-in-painting; it keeps breaking down into incidents, and those incidents keep grating against one another. Birmelin doesn't have much of a hold on anatomy: when he paints a hand, it is a schematic mechanism built of blocky pieces. And his attempts at modern self-referentiality—the paintings composed of several panels, the way the picture will continue onto the sides of the support—don't add anything. Yet Birmelin is extremely knowledgeable about ways of making space, ways of overlapping space, ways of moving us from foreground to background and back again. If that knowledge feels unsynthesized, it's perhaps because the hard realities of New York don't permit the luxury of synthesis. Birmelin's people are blinkered, looking down or to the side or resolutely forward. They hurtle along, heedless of one another. Yet Birmelin brings to this chaotic situation a sensibility that is essentially liberal: he wants to find kindness amidst the numbing chaos. In some of the recent paintings, two hands—hands that seem detached from anything around them —come close, and there's a little rain of coins, one or two, falling from one hand to another, an offering to a panhandler. And then the feet shoot on . . . if one can be sure (one can't) that those are the feet attached to the hand that gave. In response to a city that's coming apart at the seams, Robert Birmelin has painted paintings that are coming apart at the seams. The paintings, despite all their elaborate contrivance, are believable. Robert Birmelin is the magical realist of our mean streets.

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Dance

Making omelettes

by Eva Resnikova

There is perhaps no more salient demonstration of the attenuated state of the classical ballet than the number of ethnic dance troupes being showcased this autumn in New York. These range all the way from the traditional folkloric to the contemporary postmodern, and the largest contingent is Japanese, with four troupes performing within a single two-week period in late September and early October. The season opened on September 18 with the Japanese modern-dance company Sankai Juku, which presented its ninety-minute dance drama "The Egg Stands Out of Curiosity" for a week at City Center as the first leg of a three-month North American tour.

Sankai Juku is an exemplar of the genre known as Butoh, which evolved in the 1960s as a reaction against the emotional restriction and rigid stylization of such classical Japanese theatrical forms as Kabuki and Noh. The creators of Butoh sought a dance theater not tied to the restraints of tradition and capable of the personal expression of the individual dancer. Or so they claim. In practice, Butoh —at least as currently purveyed by Sankai Juku—appears to these Western eyes as restricted, stylized, rigid, ritualized, unindividuated, and hierarchical as any of the traditional Japanese forms. It has simply chosen to abide by a different, self-imposed set of restrictions.

Obscurantism also seems to be high on the list of Sankai Juku's attributes. The narrative of "The Egg Stands Out of Curiosity" is presented in an opaque and disconnected fashion that keeps the audience continually guessing about what the intended meanings might be. Section titles on the order of "From Beyond" and "Faint Light Infused" do little to clarify the action, and a poem by the troupe's artistic director and star dancer, Ushio Amagatsu, including lines like "From the occupation of one spot, to the shared protection of the space./One halts the process before it becomes stifling," serves mainly to obfuscate further.

"The Egg Stands Out of Curiosity" does indeed include among its properties several recognizably ovoid objects, one of them suspended above the point of a low pyramid. Dominating the stage is a shallow pool of water, in which much of the action takes place. A few minutes into the piece, two streams—one of water, the other of sand —begin falling from above. This continues for the duration, the water going into the pool, the sand forming a mound on a small island, hourglass-style.

The members of this all-male but vaguely androgynous troupe, Mr. Amagatsu and a backup quartet, are made up to resemble grotesquely foetoid creatures, completely hairless and covered in white greasepaint from head to toe. Later in the evening they appear with the ends of their fingers painted red, and Mr. Amagatsu sports red gashes on his throat, so that he resembles a victim of Jack the Ripper after a few weeks chilling in the morgue. Costumes consist of artfully

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arranged white draperies that soon become soaked and cling to the dancers' emaciated bodies in great clumps.

One is puzzled by Butoh's stated claim of encouraging individual expression, as one cannot even tell the dancers apart. More often than not the ensemble performs in perfect unison, even to the extent of the cawing cries they utter. Faces remain expressionless apart from a few desultory silent screams. The actual movement vocabulary is severely limited by the simple fact that everything is done at the same excruciatingly slow tempo, which lends the entire enterprise an undifferentiated air. There is a sameness as well to what is being expressed, most of the movement indicating pain and suffering.

Sankai Juku is notable for its complete lack of irony. A section in which the dancers continually attempt to rise to an upright position only to fall swooning backward into the pool, to the accompaniment of zany marimba music—the music throughout is remarkably junky Western stuff, much of it of the New Age persuasion—should have been hilarious but was presented with great solemnity. In fact, the only humorous moment in the entire evening occurred during the curtain calls, which are taken "in character," in extreme slow motion, and in the water. When several black-clad, matronly usherettes appeared with cellophane-wrapped bouquets to present to the artists, the hapless ladies found themselves divided from the intended recipients by a large body of water. Mr. Amagatsu, obviously miffed, attempted to ignore them; the other dancers, nonplused, looked to their leader for direction. After an unseemly wait, Mr. Amagatsu, with an air of disgust, deigned to leave the water to accept the proffered posies.

Sankai Juku is the best-known and most traveled of the Butoh groups, having left Japan in 1980 and toured constantly since. Now based in Paris, it has something of the superficially Gallic clinging to it. Indeed, the troupe is reportedly looked down upon by some of the more rigorously ascetic of the proponents of Butoh for its eschewal of danger and eager embrace of the international touring circuit. As first practiced, Butoh was raw and violent; one of its founders, Tatsumi Hijikata, used to kill chickens onstage and dance in their blood. In its early days Sankai Juku had an act in which the dancers allowed themselves to be suspended by their ankles from ropes over the sides of tall buildings and slowly lowered, but the practice was abandoned in 1985 when a rope broke and one of their number plunged to his death. While Sankai Juku can hardly be blamed for abandoning this particular routine, there are other, less physically hazardous ways of courting artistic danger. At present, the only hazard Sankai Juku faces is terminal chic.

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Books

The Lady J

by Neal Kozodoy

"Overdetermined"—a Freudianism and one of the many fixed epithets in Harold Bloom's imposing lexicon—is a term that in other circumstances this distinguished literary critic might have fairly applied to the epiphany he unveils in *The Book of J*: that the author of the oldest stories in the Hebrew Bible was a woman.[1] Overdetermined, and —another Bloomism—belated into the bargain, for the idea smacks not so much of an original interpretative breakthrough as of an attempt, by means of a creative if weak misreading (still another Bloom trademark), to absorb and thence to escape a bedeviling anxiety of influence (ditto). But this is a tale which bears telling in parts.

While the great war in the universities against the value and viability of our culture proceeds as it proceeds, in a corner of one traditional redoubt of humanistic study, as in a ghetto under implacable siege, there has been an amazingly vigorous flush of creativity. The corner is occupied by the Bible. In the field of the humanities it is hard to think of an area where so much fresh critical intelligence has been so fruitfully employed as in the recent effort to understand and interpret the Bible as, precisely, a foundational work of Western consciousness.

That is, of Western literary consciousness. Whether or not individual scholars have been touched personally by the recent (and very qualified) relegitimation of religion in the intellectual culture at large, their work has been aimed wholly at a deeper apprehension not of the creedal but of the aesthetic and imaginative qualities of the great Text, and of those qualities alone. To that end have been mustered, in hands of varying competence and talent, all the customary tools of the modern interpretative trade, from the New Criticism to feminism and deconstruction —and not excluding, from time to time, a certain respectful reliance on traditional exegetical sources and modes of inquiry. Deservedly the best-known books to have arisen out of this initiative are Robert Alter's subtle volumes on the Hebrew Scriptures, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* and *The Art of Biblical Poetry*; other notable growths include works by Kenneth R. R. Gros Louis, Meir Sternberg, Gabriel Josipovici, Northrop Frye, James Ackerman, Frank Kermode. Already the field has yielded a critical florilegium, *The Literary Guide to the Bible*, edited by Alter and Kermode (1987), and also an extracurricular bouquet, mostly of *fleurs du mal*, edited by David Rosenberg and entitled *Congregation: Contemporary Writers Read the Jewish Bible* (1987).

Into this pasture now charges the buccaneering and ferociously energetic Harold Bloom with his highly developed apparatus of strong and weak poets, his maps of misreading, his doctrines of struggle, repression, and

1 *The Book of J*, translated from the Hebrew by David Rosenberg, interpreted by Harold Bloom; Grove Weidenfeld, 340 pages, $21.95.

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revision, above all his detestation of the "normative." But he is not alone: *The Book of J* is a collaborative effort, of sorts. Over two-thirds of it consists of Bloom commenting on, interpreting, and theorizing about those fragmentary passages in the first five books of the Hebrew Bible (the Pentateuch) which are commonly regarded by scholars as among the most antique and which in shorthand have been collectively designated "J" (for Jahweh, or Yahweh, the term for God characteristically used in these passages). The remainder is taken up by a new translation of the spotty "J" text(s) by David Rosenberg, who in addition to *Congregation* has also edited another amateur-night anthology, *Testimony: Contemporary Writers Make the Holocaust Personal*, and who is a poet of no striking gifts.

A curiosity in itself, the relation of interpreter to translator seems roughly that of the daring and resourceful masked rider of the plains to his faithful Indian companion, Tonto. The critical chase and showdown are Bloom's entirely; Rosenberg, who is given a couple of "Translator's Appendixes" in which to justify himself, has little or no role in defining that larger enterprise, being limited to appreciative grunts as he runs to fetch the horses, and a single fatuous effort to join the fun by guessing the age of "J" when, supposedly, she sat down to write: "I confronted her age, found her with enough experience of life and history to be just over forty, with a still vital appetite for life. I realized," he trails off haplessly, "I was only identifying myself...."

Still, without David Rosenberg it appears there would *be* no horses—the English text provided by him is, crucially, the text from which Harold Bloom, who in this book adequately signals his grasp of Hebrew by mangling the first word he essays and by failing to improve thereafter, draws his whole exegetical breath and sustenance. It matters, therefore, that the nags are gimpy in the extreme. The problem is not simply that Rosenberg's version lacks formal beauty, being clangy in sound, klutzy in rhythm, alternately raw, jagged, inarticulate and talky, breezy, "cool." "'It is no good the man be alone,'" stammers Rosenberg's Yahweh, preparatory to creating woman, who herself will soon chatter to the snake, "'Just the tree in the middle of the garden, the God said. You can't eat from it, you can't touch—without death touching you.'" Such *kemosabe* effects are perhaps no more than can be expected. Nor, to anyone who has looked into this translator's previous work, do solecisms and other faults of usage surprise, though it is surprising that they do not appear to grate upon the superkeen sensibilities of Harold Bloom. What is weird, and thoroughly disfiguring to Bloom's own critical project, are the many outright inaccuracies in Rosenberg's rendering of the Hebrew text; the repeated misconstruals of plain meaning; most brazenly of all, the words and phrases wantonly interpolated by the translator in order to make the Bible poetically more "significant," and ladled out in a manner quite foreign to the delicate procedures of biblical poetics (the gratuitous notion of death "touching" you in return for your own "touching" being a minor but typical example).

Yet all this, the work of a translator who in his "Appendix" claims to have departed "from a literal word-for-word slavery" *only* "for the sake of accuracy," is accepted by Bloom as (to coin a phrase) gospel. Though Bloom shows a thorough familiarity with other English renderings of the Bible, and once cites several of them at length for the sake of drawing verbal comparisons, either he must really consider this one to be more faithful, or he does not care. Submerged in his own habit, he scores indiscriminately from the dope at hand.

Delusionary, however, are the visions that arise therefrom; the more elaborate, the more delusionary. A good part of *The Book of J*—really the best part—is devoted to close readings, in Bloom's masterly style, of individual episodes and motifs in the "J" fragments. These, even if not always so novel as he fancies, nevertheless often marvelously instruct. But then time and again some intri-

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cate and soaring edifice of exegesis, absolutely critical to the larger points Bloom intends with regard to "J"'s aesthetic purposes and achievement, turns out to sway disastrously on the rotten pilasters of Rosenberg's translation. In an exhaustive article in the November issue of *Commentary* Robert Alter has devastatingly catalogued the results of what he terms Bloom's "catastrophic decision" to link his commentary to this translation; fatal to Bloom's ambitions as an amateur scholar, Alter's analysis exposes as well a scandalous irresponsibility in his procedures as a professional critic.

In a similarly conclusive manner, Alter deals with the evidence Bloom adduces for the proposition (in itself at once unprovable and unfalsifiable) that "J" was a woman —and specifically, since Bloom waxes precise on this point, a high-born, sophisticated lady, "herself of Davidic blood," who began her great work in the last years of King Solomon (tenth century B.C.E.) and then wrote on into the reign of his son Rehoboam. (She would thus have been a contemporary if not a friend of that other great literary artist of the Bible, known as the Court Historian, the creator of the surpassing figure of David.) The narrowly linguistic support Bloom cites for his hypothesis takes the form of supposed buried allusions within the "J" texts to the name Rehoboam; as testimony it is embarrassingly thin, verging on the infantile. And as for the tricky issue of whether, from expressed or inferred attitudes toward the men and women of the narrative, and especially toward the figure of Yahweh, it is possible to deduce the author's sex, here the arguments Bloom musters for his bold thrust—namely, that "'J' has no heroes, only heroines," and toward Yahweh maintains "a mother's somewhat wary but still proudly amused stance toward a favorite son who has grown up to be benignly powerful but also eccentrically irascible"—are either equivocal or easily refutable; in any case, as Alter points out, following Bloom's criteria one would have to conclude that *Anna Karenina* was written by a woman. No, Bloom's choice —anxious, overdetermined—has a simpler and more adventitious explanation. In his own words, "it was only in the last year that I began to wonder whether the voice I encounter in the text is that of a woman. My starting point of wonder came when I heard yet once more the familiar contention of feminist criticism that my own theories of influence are patriarchal...."

Patriarchal: what Bloom accomplishes with his ascription of female authorship is a classic Bloomian maneuver of weak revisionist accommodation—to, in this case, his perceived academic competitors, feminism and the assault on the canon. Even as he appears to be undercutting feminist derogations of the Bible as fount and origin of Western patriarchy—for behold, he proclaims, the voice is the voice of a *woman*, and the hands are, too—he is silently bowing to the feminist line on Western literary history. Likewise, even as he may appear to be braving the canon-smashers—for he unashamedly exalts the work of at least one biblical author as a never-to-be-dislodged legacy of transcendent genius—he is busy undoing, precisely, the biblical canon itself, the *ur*-canon of them all, keeping this little "J" bit, rejecting that whole non-"J" lot, until what has survived his disaggregating animus are but shrunken shreds, *disjecta membra*, a paltry guilt-offering on the accumulated pyre of Western writing.

Needless to say, his own view of the matter differs. As Bloom sees it, he is embarked, rather, on a grand rescue mission: salvaging the earliest examples of the literary Sublime from those moralizers and "normativizers" of old who cut, rewrote, padded, and otherwise surrounded and smothered "J" with religion; and, more urgently still, from the millennia of encrusted misreadings layered upon a free spirit by rabbis, scribes, and priests, theologians and, lately, scholars. His is the zeal of a restorer, an original intentionalist, a literalist, a strict constructionist; no Karaite has ever so fanatically repudiated whatever could be construed as coming, illegitimately, after. Indeed, for one on record, interminably, in the belief that

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"poetry lives always under the shadow of poetry," that even Homer "is in the position of being 'after,'" and who has forged a critical living off the dizzying modulations of belatedness, Bloom in his craze for the lady "J" comes heretically close to announcing the end (or, rather, the beginning) of the literary rainbow.

A glance at the pot of gold may help us to understand why. As he reads his chopped-up and pared-down stories of the creation, of the patriarchs, of the exodus from Egypt and the wanderings in the desert, Bloom limns an author who is no moralist, and assuredly no pietist, but a writer of "uncanny sophistication" and "immense literary power," a writer "comparable in imagination and rhetoric only to the greatest Western authors: Homer, Dante, Chaucer, Shakespeare, Cervantes, Tolstoy," and, as a "dramatic ironist," unmatched in Western literature "until Shakespeare."

And the book she wrote? In Bloom's infatuated recounting it too is no (mere) collection of sacred tales, no recital of sacred history, but something entirely peerless: *the* "song of perpetual human becoming and overcoming," the sublimest conceivable chant to "the exuberance of being." In the figure of Yahweh, "the West's major literary character" and "J"'s supreme invention, we have but another name for her own "awakened imagination"—awakened audaciously, without a trace of awe or fear or inhibition, to reality.

"Impish," "incommensurate," "wild and free, an almost unconditioned impulse," this Yahweh represents "sheer energy and force of becoming, of breaking into fresh being," which is why His favorites, and "J"'s ideal humans, are by analogy the vivid, the zestful, the zealous, the dynamic: David above all, who does not appear in "J"'s text but is her glorious *heros absconditus* and the mold in which she retrojectively casts Joseph, Jacob, Abraham, and their tough, all-enabling women (and, Bloom hazards, Yahweh Himself). To such as these, with their "drive for more life," is vouchsafed "the Blessing," and the Blessing is always: more life.

Thus the Bible according to Bloom. There is of course a great deal more, including a complicated and quite contradictory reading in which Yahweh ceases to be that "almost unconditioned impulse," pure id, a heavenly Harpo, but suddenly becomes the source rather of "our unconscious sense of guilt." ("The Freudian Superego," Bloom now writes, "just about *is* 'J''s Yahweh.") But such "ironic" entanglements aside, Bloom's unfettering of the early biblical narratives gives us a document of wonderful coherence: in one place, expressed unforgettably by "a single, magnificent mind," the oldest Western imagining of the emphatically secular idea that "life is the only good."

The allegiance Bloom himself palpably swears to this idea—he is proud to endorse it as a blasphemy, "J" as a blasphemous writer—accounts, no doubt, for the vivid, zestful, zealous, and dynamic energy with which he rides it in *The Book* and on the back *of J*. And it must be said that Harold Bloom is an impressive demystifier; to read him on the Bible while in a state of temporary suspension of disbelief can be an eye-opening, scale-dropping experience. (The same may be said, however, *mutatis mutandis*, of reading Marx on economic history.) As for the blasphemy, it should not be necessary to dwell on the particular quality of Bloom's steady rampage here (and elsewhere) against religious authority and "how little [it] knows," the glee he takes in tearing up the shoots of the "normative," in ruining the sacred truths. Over *The Book of J* there hovers a tantrum spirit, the spirit of the obnoxious little boy in Philip Roth's story ("The Conversion of the Jews") who, repelled by the pieties of his Hebrew-school teacher, threatens to jump from the roof unless the rabbi concede that God "can make a child without intercourse." And as with that little snot, who will not descend until he has "made them all say they believed in Jesus Christ—first one at a time, then all together," it emerges that Harold Bloom, too, is not just out to bait, to expose pious fraud, to rouse to jealousy with a no-god. Chains of counter-dogma rattle behind his freedom cry.

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Having turned "script into Scripture," the Jews, writes Harold Bloom, "still worship a book." This is an arrant falsehood; their religion forbids idolatry. But true, perhaps, of him. To the particular god he adores he has long given the name of the literary Sublime, or Beauty, and to its greater glory over the years he has devoted a prodigious service. Not until his discovery of "J," however, has he worked out with any explicitness the leading doctrines of his faith; maybe nowhere until now, not even in Homer, Shakespeare, Tolstoy, and the rest, has he found them so well conjoined in (for him) Scripture. Repeatedly expounded in his commentary, they reduce in effect to a single slogan: "Exuberance is Beauty." The motto is William Blake's (one of Bloom's saints) and it "sums up," he asserts, "'J' and Shakespeare alike," the two strongest Western writers. This exuberance he identifies completely with the "daemonism" and "vitalism" represented by "J"'s Yahweh; its value for him is positively, well, normative, its Dionysian import caught perfectly in a sentence which reads, "That is the splendor of [Yahweh's] Blessing: more life means that everything is possible."

As an article of faith, this resonates rather more of Nietzsche (another of Bloom's "strong" writers) than of any part of the Hebrew Bible, from which, in that terrible phrase "everything is possible," it definitively takes its distance in spiraling realms of darkness. Is it somehow to be discovered, nevertheless, in "J"? Only if Harold Bloom's will can prove it so. As a critic Bloom makes an ingratiating and even a persuasive bully; but at the breaking of the day, when the shadows flee, the figments he has wrestled into the fierce mold of his convictions relapse into fragments, reconcilable with their canonical surroundings more reasonably than with his hot teaching. Context is all.

It is, indeed, an irony that the combination of Bloom's antinomianism and his intense cult of the artist "J" should end up straitjacketing so protean a work as the Bible, as if a price had to be paid in literary coin for doing in the name of art that which he ascribes to his nemeses in the name of religion: "choosing forms of worship from poetic tales" (Blake again). But so it is. For one thing, in defining "J"'s genius as secular he has boxed himself into a ludicrously impoverished estimate of his own author's range of imagining—like reading Dante and noticing only the arson. (For a devotee of the free imagination, Bloom can be astoundingly rigid.) But the disservice he does to "J" is as nothing to the disservice he does to literary standards. For the truth is that these passages, fine as they are, do not sustain, on their own, the high claims of beauty he enters on their behalf. Artistically and psychologically far superior to, say, *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, "J" cannot compete except intermittently with Shakespeare or, more pertinently, with the early biblical narratives considered as an aesthetic whole.

A reader of "J"—even, one suspects, Bloom himself—is haunted by the *missing* biblical Sublime: the binding of Isaac, the song at the sea, the vatic farewell orations of Moses, and everything else. No interpretation of the remaining shards, however ingenious or strenuous, can supply the want. Nor, frankly, do the lone "J"'s literary powers, especially of characterization, impress as they ought. "Her idea of Yahweh is imaginative, even Shakespearean," trumpets Bloom, "while the normative reductions of her Yahweh are quite primitive." Rather the opposite. Caprice without charm, passion without memory, energy without direction, exuberance without pride, fortitude, or consciousness of loss: the crude materials, perhaps, of a Shakespearean drama, but only a Harold Bloom could from such poetic tales choose a form of worship. That he does so performing signs and wonders need not deter other readers from holding out, with the ancient Israelites, for something less primitive. The David who in his rapture shouts, "Some by chariots, others by horses, but we in the name of our God declaim!," is, like the Hebrew God of Whom he shouts it, a figure dancing well out beyond the grasp of these brilliant, confident misreadings.

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Making sport of modern art

Kirk Varnedoe A Fine Disregard: What Makes Modern Art Modern. Abrams, 319 pages, $39.95

reviewed by Karen Wilkin

Any book announced as "an entirely new vision of modern art's origins and its subsequent meanings" is bound to raise expectations, even hopes, all the more so when the author is the new director of the Department of Painting and Sculpture of the Museum of Modern Art. I confess I was doubly curious about Kirk Varnedoe's *A Fine Disregard* because, despite the author's considerable reputation, it has been difficult to assess his abilities from his track record of exhibitions and catalogue contributions so far.

Before his appointment to MOMA, Varnedoe was known for a couple of modest, serious shows and couple of flashy ones. He had organized a welcome study of Gustave Caillebotte, the Impressionists' champion, collector, and sometime colleague, and a survey of Scandinavian painting, as unfamiliar as Caillebotte in this country. Varnedoe was far better known for having collaborated with William Rubin on MOMA's controversial "'Primitivism' in Twentieth-Century Art" and for having worked on the enigmatic "Vienna 1900." The exhibitions of Caillebotte and of Scandinavian painting were informative and fairly straightforward, but told us little about Varnedoe's eye and taste. The "Affinities" section of "'Primitivism,'" which was his chief contribution to the show, didn't tell us much more. A kind of randomness prevailed in the selections, and some of it was just plain silly. Placing a Kenneth Noland "circle" painting next to a New Guinea shield with concentric motifs told us nothing about either object. As far as I know, Noland has never been interested in Oceanic art, and I feel certain that the motivations of the maker of the shield were quite different from those of the American abstract painter. (Varnedoe's catalogue essay on contemporary artists who consciously attempt to imitate shamanistic practices or recreate ancient monuments—"primitive" or not—raised more interesting questions.)

"Vienna 1900" was problematic. I still find it hard to believe that anyone found the show to be the revelation it was purported to be. Anybody with a claim on visual literacy already knew that Kokoschka's early portraits are probably his best work and that Schiele's drawings are disquieting and wonderful. That turn-of-the-century Vienna had an impressive share of heavy-hitters in fields ranging from music to architecture to philosophy to nascent psychoanalysis was not exactly news, either. Nor did the exhibition make Varnedoe's aesthetic any clearer. It gave him the occasion for some perplexing comparisons between Klimt and Matisse—he seemed inordinately taken with Klimt—which were not reassuring. The real shock came with his book on, of all people, the hyper-realist sculptor Duane Hansen. All one could say with any certainty was that Varnedoe was unpredictable. His new book promised to set us straight on his views. I'm afraid it does.

A Fine Disregard begins with a summary of a range of possible approaches to the history of modern art. Varnedoe presents a fairly evenhanded litany of alternatives, but finds all of them wanting. He rejects, not surprisingly, the now outmoded claims of modernism's pragmatic truthfulness, of its scientific objectivity, of its higher spiritual value. (He apparently rejects the word "modernism," too.) After much discussion, he rejects, albeit reluctantly, the approaches of contextualists, decoders, sociologists, and Marxist historians. His greatest contempt, however, is reserved for what would ordinarily be called a formalist point of view, except that Varnedoe avoids this word, also. He ridicules the notion that the innovations of early modernists made possible or prepared the way for the inventions of artists who came after them and particularly scorns what no one can fail to recognize as a rather oversimplified version

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of Clement Greenberg's views: the dismissive (and simplistic) phrase "the Road to Flatness" is used as a shorthand equivalent for Greenberg's ideas about the characteristics of postwar abstraction and the work that preceded it. But Greenberg's name is never mentioned, either in the introductory section or in the even more pointed jibes later in the book. You have to check the notes for this and for other, only slightly less barbed attributions. The distinguished scholar John Rewald, for example, is identified in the notes as the author of "The history of Impressionism described in terms of a 'discovery' model . . ."

That Varnedoe declares his opposition to Greenberg early on is to be expected. Apart from anything else, anti-Greenbergism is regarded, in some circles, as an obligatory proof of seriousness, an unmistakable sign of independence of mind and up-to-date-ness. (Extreme anti-Greenbergists use the man's name in the way I imagine Bernard of Clairveaux used the word "infidel" when whipping up support for the second Crusade.) What is more surprising is Varnedoe's evident hostility to the thinking of Alfred Barr, whose attempts to sort out what he perceived as significant in the art of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries are skewered in the introduction. The book's subtext could be described as a refutation of Barr's ideas, but his name appears nowhere. What makes this startling is that Barr's conception of the march of modernism, a model based on formal and qualitative judgments as well as historical ones, largely shaped the Museum of Modern Art as we know it and as Varnedoe inherited it, the contributions and achievements of staff in between (particularly of Varnedoe's immediate predecessor, William Rubin) notwithstanding. Barr had his idiosyncrasies and his blind spots. His ideas do not provide all the answers or even provoke all the questions, but they shaped the thinking of more than one generation of New Yorkers, which may be exactly what Varnedoe is objecting to. (An astute and knowledgeable colleague said recently, "You know, for years I didn't know it was Barr. I thought it was the truth.") More important, Barr's ideas produced a great museum and one that Varnedoe is now in charge of.

What does he propose instead of all these rejected conceptions? A kind of Darwinian model, but a Darwinian model with a difference, we are told. The evolution of modern art, Varnedoe says,

> has nothing to do with universal, natural laws. Its unfolding depends on (though its results are not determined by) the conditions of specific cultures at a distinctive moment in history . . . And the raw material here is not random change, but personal initiative: the individual decisions to be an outsider within one's own world, to try new meanings for old forms, and attack old tasks with new means, to accept the strange as useful and to reconsider the familiar as fraught with possibility.

In other words, Varnedoe proceeds from the assumption that art is made by human beings who are burdened with particular cultural baggage (as well as, one assumes, the inevitable personal *mishegoss*), and that this baggage is a function of time and place and is affected in some way by individual choice, will, intuition, and, although Varnedoe doesn't say so, maybe even talent, all randomly assigned. Is this really a new insight?

The discussion of Degas, Gauguin, Van Gogh, and some of their colleagues can serve as an illustration of Varnedoe's approach. True to the method of his introductory chapter, he outlines the conventional wisdom, that Impressionism and Postimpressionism were affected by photography, which had become something other than a remote curiosity by the 1860s and 1870s, and by Japanese prints, which were becoming known in the West about the time that the photograph began to be a familiar form of representation. But, Varnedoe tells us, these neat comparisons are open to question. The informal "snap-shot" view that we associate with so many Impressionist and Postimpressionist paintings was decidedly not a convention of photography of the period. The occasional cropped figure may turn up in

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the periphery of a large view, but unsought and probably unwanted. Not only do Impressionist paintings not resemble contemporary photographs—Varnedoe stresses their resemblance to photographs of our time, rather than of theirs—but, and he ignores this, some nineteenth-century photographers went to great lengths, through effects of lighting or manipulations of the plate or negative, to make their pictures resemble the traditional academic painting of their day. (This, by the way, is familiar information these days.)

The spatial compressions of Impressionism and Postimpressionism have real precedents in Japanese prints. Here Varnedoe is more informative. He points out that the Japanese images that directly influenced painters such as Van Gogh—he translated them into paintings, just as he did the compositions of Doré, Delacroix, Millais, and many others—were the work of a single artist, Hiroshige, and that far from being conventions of Japanese representation, the dramatic contrasts of foreground and background objects in these images, as well as their dramatic cropping, were relatively new inventions, themselves the result of Japanese artists' first encounters with European perspective. A few of these artists, among them Hiroshige and his older colleague Hokusai, became fascinated by what happened when things close were enormously enlarged to serve as foils for much diminished things far away, with not much in between—Mt. Fuji seen through a screen of oversized plum branches, for example. Such overlappings were exciting alternatives to traditional Oriental ways of suggesting distance by placing things higher up in the picture plane, without any change in relative size.

Varnedoe's argument, according to his Darwinian model, is that this aspect of the evolution of Japanese art was necessary to the evolution of Impressionism and Postimpressionism. It's certainly interesting and apparently true. It even counteracts current anxiety about Eurocentrism. But does it really illuminate, say, Van Gogh? We can document that he knew Hiroshige's prints, whatever their genesis, but since he knew nothing of Hiroshige's history or context, can this possibly bear meaningfully on Van Gogh's art?

In relation to Hiroshige's practice, Varnedoe discusses Degas's thrifty habit of montaging his own images together, repeating fragments and recombining them in new ways, adding a row of spectators from one theater sketch to a stage full of dancers from another, but in a later chapter, entitled "Fragmentation and Repetition," he seems to have lost interest in the phenomenon. Varnedoe sees repetition as a modernist —sorry, modern—notion and, as illustration, points to Rodin's practice of making multiple "stock" parts—drawers full of arms and legs, hands and feet—and assembling his sculptures from them. (I seem to remember something about the the decorative Tangara figures that adorned Greek households being made the same way.) It was Rodin's way of exploring permutations, seeing what would happen if he made slight changes, responding to suggestions that arose in the course of working, just as, I suspect, Degas's recycling of particular groups of figures was. It is also arguably an indicator of a kind of abstractness in Rodin, a sense that parts acquired meaning and significance as much by virtue of placement as because of their character. But for all his insistence on the modernity of repetition, Varnedoe does not explore this idea, but makes a rather literal-minded comparison with the sequential photographs of Eadweard Muybridge and Etienne-Jules Marey. Degas doesn't come into it.

Such comparisons are typical of *A Fine Disregard*. Varnedoe has a good deal to say about photography and keeps questioning the relationship and the differences between the artist's and the photographer's vision. He attaches great importance to points of view, both literal and imaginary. On the whole, his observations on photography, tied as they are to ruminations on technology and perception, are more engaging than most of what he has to say about painting and sculpture. Varnedoe does not limit himself to comparisons with photography, though, or

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with other disciplines outside the realm of painting and sculpture, such as design and architecture. He also embraces non-art and the vernacular, reminding us not to underestimate the role of "low" context in the evolution of "high" art, and coincidentally providing what must be a preview of his debut exhibition at MOMA this fall, "High and Low: Modern Art and Popular Culture."

All in all, *A Fine Disregard* is a curious book that promises more than it delivers. What appear to be fresh observations tend to evaporate or to resolve themselves into the familiar or the known. Others seem slightly beside the point. This, on Matisse's celebrated interior *Harmony in Red* (1908, The Hermitage, Leningrad), that astonishing dining room filled with arabesque floral patterns of cloth and wallpaper, a maid arranging a compote of fruit, a couple of rigid "country" chairs, and a bucolic landscape —is it a window or a framed picture?— playing havoc with the relentless red surface:

> This picture is not about denying, or closing down. It is about embracing or enlarging from within. The theme it treats and the way it was made both have to do not just with the new artistic mileage that can be gotten out of supposedly dead forms, but with the newly energized sense of life, and human experience, that can be gotten from that kind of reconsideration, and from that kind of self-consciously "artificial" art. The eliminations and simplifications—the reduced detail, or most notably the minimized cues for depth—are pursued with this end in view, of reopening, rather than narrowing, the play between what we know and what we discover, between our awareness of a limited set of conventions and our ability to enlarge our response to life through their manipulation.

But who ever suggested that the painting was about "denying or closing down" in the first place? And since when does formal inventiveness preclude a sense of "human experience"? A good part of the extraordinary power of Matisse lies in his ability to transform the utterly banal because of his uncanny visual intelligence. Recognizing that banality, I suppose, enhances our perception of what Matisse has done, which may be what Varnedoe was driving at, but there is something suspiciously like Bernard Berenson's notion of "life-enhancement" through the contemplation of illusionistically modeled form about that last sentence.

Varnedoe has some interesting things to say about Brancusi's three-part monument at Tirgu Jiu. The artist made the table and stools, the gate, and the "endless" column serve as a monument to the military dead—by sheer insistence, it seems. The images were ones he had used before, profoundly informed by Romanian vernacular tradition (a high-low association Varnedoe leaves alone, however), and it was only by executing them at monumental scale and describing them in new terms that Brancusi endowed them with symbolic meaning. I had expected this to lead to a discussion of the notion of will and intent in contemporary art; instead, it drifts off into a discussion of Minimalism and modular units, repetition in the most literal sense.

Who is the book intended for? It's hardly a comprehensive overview, so it's probably not meant for students, nor, perhaps, for the general public, but even that is unclear. While the text (often) presumes a certain familiarity with the territory, the repetition of various illustrations with the text suggests that the reader knows the works so little that he or she cannot be expected to remember what Degas's *Place de la Concorde* ("Vicomte Lepic and His Daughters") looks like for more than twenty pages at a time. This may be intended as a convenience, but why then is no size or provenance given in the captions? For that you have to flip to the back. The tone and the frequent elaborate explanations of the basic suggest that this is not a book for the specialist. Varnedoe's style alternates between colloquial, regular-guy turns that must have gone down well with his students, and academically convoluted exposition that probably had the same effect on his colleagues. Received wisdom is attributed to "a zillion" commentators, Gauguin's ideas

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about where the Tahitians came from are described as "part Thor Heyerdahl and part Shirley MacLaine," but then we come across a passage like this, in a discussion (sort of) of sequential photographs:

> Their more aggressive notion of applied mechanics, and the altered idea of representation it entailed, looked beyond the complementary relationship of fragmentation and repetition in the original chronophotographs. The coexistence of decomposed bits and standardized intervals, as laid out in imagery like that of Muybridge, was but the vestigial sign of analysis. The vector in Marey, or the binding curve of [Frank B.] Gilbreth's loops, represented the affirmative new synthesis that fused all the broken variety of particulars into new, artificially clarified, forms of unity. The former pair was the mark of probing investigation, but the emergent line was the mark of controlling certainty.

Segue into Futurism.

The title, *A Fine Disregard*, as everyone must know by now, comes from a plaque commemorating the invention of rugby when, in 1823, a Rugby School student with "a fine disregard for the rules of football as played in his time" picked up the ball and ran with it. (The first two illustrations in the book are, amazingly enough, a photograph of the plaque and a Monty Pythonesque view of the playing field at Rugby.) The event furnishes the title and metaphor for the book and raises one of its most interesting questions—why didn't anyone stop this young man? Varnedoe wonders at this, but never fully answers the question in terms of that 1823 game; elsewhere, he declares that we not only need innovators for the evolution of modern art, but spectators who are willing to go along with the innovations.

Attractive as the phrase "a fine disregard" is, the metaphor is not always as apt as Varnedoe would have us think. He means it, I believe, to emphasize the role of individual initiative, as opposed to historical or internal imperative, in the development of modern art, but it implies a kind of enthusiasm for novelty, for newness for its own sake, that doesn't always fit the facts. How to account, for example, for Manet, the reluctant innovator, painting "modern life" according to the advice of his friend Baudelaire, but leaning on the Renaissance masters he admired, striving to equal their intensity, potency, and (if one may use the despised words) high quality? What about Cézanne, who always longed for official recognition? A case can be made for these pivotal figures being modernists in spite of themselves: they rejected not tradition, but the nineteenth century's debased academic version of tradition, and found that rejection led them into unforeseen, unexpected places. Why they did precisely what they did, when they did it, remains, ultimately, a mystery and unanswerable, no matter how scrupulously we examine the evidence, no matter how carefully we study the clues of their times and their daily lives.

I suppose that is the ambition of *A Fine Disregard*: to shed light by painstakingly trying to assemble a wealth of ideas, images, general knowledge, and attitudes that may have nourished the artists of the recent past. It's the kind of information we all have automatically, effortlessly, for our own times, but that we can never hope to recreate fully for any other period. Varnedoe is good at accumulating peripheral evidence. The problem is his tacit assumption that all of it—whether visual, mechanical, historical, what have you—is equally significant and interesting and that, conversely, paintings and sculptures have no more claim to our attention than advertisements, technical diagrams, or the documentary photographs that he presents to illustrate his arguments. Rarely is all this information really brought to bear on the works of art under discussion; it simply surrounds them. Nothing in the text suggests that Varnedoe thinks of paintings and sculptures as special, expressive objects with particular physical properties. One assumes he must care deeply about art, presumably about the art *object*, as opposed to the reproduced image, or he wouldn't have spent

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his life doing what he does. But while Varnedoe's enthusiasm for the game of rugby is palpable from the first page of *A Fine Disregard*, a passion for art, oddly, is not. That may be the most disturbing—and the saddest—thing about the book.

Rewarded journeys

Charles Causley Secret Destinations: Selected Poems 1977-1988. David R. Godine, 115 pages, $9.95 paper

reviewed by William Jay Smith

One of the chief characteristics of the poetry of Charles Causley has been the skill with which he has distanced himself from his material. The speaker in each poem, even in the early war pieces based on his own experience, was placed far off, frequently centuries ago in history. This distance, this disembodiment gave the poems, especially the ballads, their timeless quality. Everything was seen *sub specie aeternitatis*: what remained with the reader was a distillation of feeling, an encounter with love and death, light moving into dark, innocence into experience. And yet with such total objectification, such significant distance, one felt always the poet's warm presence, and even in the historical ballads an unmistakable contemporaneity shining through.

In this selection of poems of the last decade, the poet is much more personal than he has ever been, at times even confessional, but his reticence is such that the self-portrait he gives us is more affecting than revealing. Causley has for years had a considerable following in England. He was one of the few poets seriously mentioned for the post of Poet Laureate on the death of John Betjeman, and his occasional poems are so skillful that one regrets that he was passed over in favor of Ted Hughes. In this country, although a few of his poems have appeared in anthologies over the years, he has found only a small audience. Not since Marianne Moore, who wrote, "the deepest feeling always shows itself in silence;/not in silence, but restraint," has reticence been much appreciated here. It is indeed the lack of restraint that has recently been praised by our most influential critics. Causley's cool approach and chaste vocabulary, as antidote to the omnipresent and overestimated baroque buffoonery of recent American poetry, are very welcome at the moment.

This selection takes its title from an epigraph of Martin Buber: "All journeys have secret destinations of which the traveler is unaware." Many of the poems are concerned with journeys to distant places, Spain, Greece, Canada, Australia, and with his strong visual imagination the poet vividly delineates the physical nature of these places; but it is the secret destination that in the end becomes the chief focus. Each journey is a kind of metaphor, a riddle, the answer to which is revealed in the writing.

The opening poem, "Sorel Point," serves as a key. The poet and his friend stand sharply outlined against the bleak native Cornish coastline, where the "quarry's hurt . . ./Spills its neat gut down the cliff-side." The poem concludes:

> Hand on the rail, I lean down to
> The almost out-of-earshot bay;
> The taut horizon's silver-grey
> Disseverance of blue and blue.
> I turn to you, but you are gone
> Up the hung path of whitened stone
> To where your wife and children wait.
> Now dispossessed of the great sea
> A stranded tide snakes under me.
> Translate, I hear you say. Translate.

These lines record a tragic, but triumphant, parting. The poet sees himself cut off from his friend and from the world he represents. Rather than father children as the friend has done, he is left to face the dark sea that ebbs beneath him. The friend's voice becomes his own inner voice telling him he must alone face that dark sea of his own subconscious mind and from it extract—and translate—the thoughts and feelings it contains into

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poetry. By giving up the world the poet finds himself; from his deprivation he distills his wealth. But in another poem, "A Little Story," he is aware of the cost of that distillation:

> Reaching a tender fame, he seemed
> As self-sufficient as the sun.
> Safe in a tower of words he hid
> His gradual wound from all but one
>
> Who found, unsought, another love;
> Untaught, another life to live,
> While he who listened to the heart
> Pondered on the alternative.

This book is a kind of autobiography in verse, the most personal account that the poet has given us. There is a series of intimate, moving family portraits—one of his grandfather Richard Bartlett, stone-cutter and quarryman, killed by a "sting of slate" as he was about to insert his wedge in the quarry wall; another of his aunt Dora Jane:

> her eye shrill blue,
> The volted glance, the flesh scrubbed apple-clean,
> Bullets for fingers, hair cut like a man,
> Feet in a prophet's sandals, took the view
> That work was worship . . .

Still another of Uncle Stan, who died in the Canadian army in World War I and became his childhood hero. A photograph that the poet contemplates—and many of these poems have been inspired by old photographs—reveals a female figure as firm as a figurehead:

> She's dressed for Sunday: finest serge,
> The high-necked blouse, a golden pin.
> My grandmother: who sewed and scrubbed,
> Cleaned out the church, took washing in.

And there is Uncle Alfred, who had a terrible temper:

> When the mood was on his children crept from the kitchen.
> It might have been mined. Not even the budgie spoke.

And cousin Gwen, who reminds him that her friend Bridie Wiles had scooped the poet from his pram and dropped him on his head. She wonders, since no one else in the family has ever written poetry, if it was the blow that set him off.

Causley has created a memorable family album in the manner of Robert Lowell's *Life Studies*. But the people he depicts are not bearers of a famous name, burdened by a Puritanical tradition; they are ordinary folk —stone-cutters, servants, washer women, eking out a difficult existence. Their poverty, bareness, and simplicity are perfectly evoked in Causley's simple bare verse. And the viewer is not tortured and troubled by his personal and family history as is Lowell but seems as simple, direct, and plain-spoken as the people he portrays. The poetry is in the pity and that pity is never turned in upon the viewer. The reader is moved to tears or laughter by the rich, varied range of the personae from this segment of the human comedy. With powerful objectivity, Causley looks beyond his own family, and, like Dylan Thomas in *Under Milk Wood*, gives life to an entire village.

A clock on his wall still fussing "inside its Gothic wooden house/Of marquetry and glass" reminds him that it was a gift from his mother's friend Maisie, the only servant in an ugly house who fought an "endless fight with all uncleanliness." And here is Dick Lander, a six-foot-four shell-shocked victim of World War I, who played a game of trains with matchboxes (Causley's father, also a victim of that war, died when the poet was seven years old):

> At firework time we throw a few at Dick.
>
> Shout, "Here comes Kaiser Bill!" Dick stares us through
> As if we're glass. We yell, "What did you do
> In the Great War?" And skid into the dark.
> "Choo, choo," says Dick. "Choo, choo,
> choo, choo, choo, choo."

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Another survivor:

> Buffalo Jenkyn,
> Five foot by three,
> Came through the First War
> Scatheless. Bullets
> And shrapnel bounced
> Off him, they said.
>
> Skin, hair, clothes,
> All buffalo-coloured.
> Wore his head low,
> Chest an escarpment
> In the Rockies.
> He'd have braked a riot.

One of the most striking village portraits is that of the poet's childhood enemy, the pork butcher's son:

> Sphinx-faced, his cheeks the colour of lard, the eyes
> Revolver-blue through Bunter spectacles.

But the enmity dies when they both go to the same grammar school. Later their paths never cross although the butcher's son, like the poet, becomes a teacher, sentenced like him to "thirty years in chalk Siberias":

> Which one of us is which hard to define
> For children in the butcher's class, and mine.

From Cornwall Causley moves out around the world, and each destination is minutely examined before its secret is uncovered. The effect is of a constant doubling of vision, the inner landscape answering and correcting the outer. He is particularly good at summoning up the Australian outback: words like "kookaburra," "jarrah," "mulga bark," and "dingo" roll naturally from his tongue. He is excellent also at recording the detritus of civilization in distant places, as at Alice Springs:

> The river-line a gash
> Of beer-cans, gums; a froth of broken glass.

Causley reveals in one poem that early in school he could not read aloud and words failed him when he confronted the "wash-tub blue" eye of the Boot Man, who stood before him like his dead father, "army boots bright as glass." Now he meets that eye on his "every-morning page." Perhaps to answer it Causley has developed his quick, cutting approach. Like his stone-cutter grandfather he bends to the poem as to the quarry's stone face, trying "to find a place to insert the wedge." His verbs are keen and swift, unexpected and unforgettable. The poem "Gudow" begins:

> The road frays to a halt.

D. M. Thomas, who accompanied Causley to this spot in Germany where "East and West confronted each other across barbed wire," remarks: "From his description, I remembered it all, yet I hadn't noticed it at the time . . . Charles had not whipped-out a notebook and biro, nor clicked a camera; yet it seemed, on my reading his poem, as if his eye or his mind were fitted with some ultra-sensitive technology, which enabled him to record unerringly; at the same time find the unerring metaphor. The road did 'fray' to a halt. Precisely. Economy is one of the most striking features of his style. Every adjective, every verb, conveys a complexity of emotion, and no word is ever used just for the sake of metre or rhyme. . . . The surface simplicity of his style is deceptive. Many poets are simple, while appearing to be profound; Causley, like Frost, is the opposite."

The most important and most secret of all the destinations in this book is revealed in the final poem, "Eden Rock," an imaginary family portrait in which the poet sees his father, twenty-five, and his mother, twenty-three, picnicking and awaiting him "somewhere beyond Eden Rock":

> She pours tea from a Thermos, the milk straight
> From an old H.P. sauce-bottle, a screw
> Of paper for a cork; slowly sets out
> The same three plates, the tin cups painted blue.
>
> The sky whitens as if lit by three suns.
> My mother shades her eyes and looks my way

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Over the drifted stream. My father spins
A stone along the water. Leisurely,

They beckon to me from the other bank.
I hear them call, "See where the stream-path is!
Crossing is not as hard as you might think."

I had not thought that it would be like this.

The poem develops in a simple, casual, almost off-hand manner with its conversational tone, its half rhymes, and its blunt, ordinary adverbs (a part of speech conscientiously avoided elsewhere). Here "slowly" and "leisurely" evoke the timeless gestures of the parents. Climax, as Marianne Moore once observed, builds like a pyramid, but that pyramid may also be inverted, as it is here, drawing the reader down to the anticlimactic and startling point of the last line. The stream-path becomes the way into the world from the womb and the way back in death. Throughout his work the loss of innocence has been one of Causley's principal themes. Here in these simple, monosyllabic words innocence, through a lifetime of experience, has been regained. It is this kind of masterful, and at times breathtaking, translation of emotion that makes Charles Causley one of the most rewarding poets writing in English today.

Shorter notices

Richard Osborne Conversations with Von Karajan. A Cornelia & Michael Bessie Book/ Harper & Row, 157 pages, $22.50

At first glance this book would seem to be nothing more than one of the last products of the late Herbert von Karajan's formidable publicity machine. All the requisite elements of this untasty genre, assembled for us by the English music critic Richard Osborne, are present here: the softball questions, the fulsome praise from the interlocutor, the self-regarding and lengthy answers, and the romantically moody portraits of the hero-conductor.

But however justified the reader's skepticism about the integrity of this book might be, to dismiss it out of hand would be to ignore the vital and profound content concealed beneath the book's luxuriant superstructure. Karajan was undoubtedly an egomaniac; he did indeed bend everyone around him to his will; he certainly was a shameless flaunter of his own success. But he was the greatest conductor of the postwar era, and his towering stature was not challenged in any way until the day of his death in July of last year.

What is important about this collection of Karajan's "musical tabletalk" is its concrete revelation of what it means to be a supremely great conductor, not in terms of fame, prosperity, or power, but in terms of just what it is such a conductor does in his daily musical work. It is tempting to say that what a great conductor does—certainly what Karajan himself did—is work, unceasingly, unsparingly, and uncomplainingly.

Mr. Osborne's *Conversations* provides some of the details. Already as a young man conducting in Aachen, Karajan was willing to spend sixty and more choral rehearsals on the simultaneous preparation of such great works as the Bach Mass in B minor and the Beethoven *Missa Solemnis*; he was at all times willing to demand of his orchestras "the long and careful preparation" that was necessary to enable them to "play music with full knowledge and without fear of error." He demanded of his orchestra players that they know their parts by heart, so that in rehearsal and concerts they might be able to take their concentration away from the printed notes and instead focus on listening to each other.

It is plain from everything we know about him that Karajan, a product of Central European classical education, was a highly cultured man. In this book he is at pains to demand the same cultivation from the members of his ensembles that he was able to bring to the music: for him, "every musician must have within himself great musicianshp and great culture." And he squarely faces the pseudo-democratic attack on anyone who demands much and compromises not at all:

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his system, he remarks, "is not elitist; it is super-elitist." Best of all, he comes down strongly against today's world's traveling maestros and trendy, capricious orchestra managers and boards.

It may be questioned whether there is any room for someone of Karajan's artistic stripe in contemporary musical life, formed as this life is by fifty-two-week seasons, rigid union contracts, audience ignorance, and the always encroaching popular culture. Young conductors, like their elders if not betters, readily and submissively accommodate themselves now to cultural and economic reality. In so doing they keep busy and make good money; other, and more basic, considerations, all of them of an artistic nature, are honored in the breach, if they are honored at all. It is the measure of Karajan's greatness, and a verdict on our own musical times, that there are no signs of his successors on the horizon.

—*Samuel Lipman*

Stanislaw Benski Missing Pieces. Translated from the Polish by Walter Arndt. A Helen & Kurt Wolff Book/Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 160 pages, $19.95

"I'm not typical," says one of Stanislaw Benski's characters, an elderly Polish-born Jew who, while most of his life a resident of Warsaw, spent his youth among relatives in New York City. "I saw no Nazis, SS-men, or Gestapo, I never laid eyes on a German soldier, and never heard a bomb or a mine explode. . . . Nobody in my family perished, nobody was gassed, nobody was shot in the forest or starved to death in the Ghetto." Seemingly alone among his contemporaries, he did not fight in the underground or suffer in a camp, and, as the great exception, feels himself to be somehow less than real. He is missing that piece of personal history that would define him as one of his generation, as a witness and survivor, as one of the last of the very last.

"I write about the few remaining Polish Jews," Benski says in a note to his readers, "about their dreams, joys, and sorrows. I write about the last residents of small villages, the *shtetlach*, about the pious and the impious, the honest and dishonest, the intelligent and the simple, about those who are forever seeing the ghetto walls and the chimneys of the crematoria. I am among them, and I am one of them. I try to preserve their memory." A decorated veteran of the Polish Army who lost his parents and brother in the war, Benski began writing fiction in 1960, when he was thirty-eight, and between then and his death two years ago published two novels and five short-story collections. *Missing Pieces* is his first book to appear in English; it contains sixteen stories published in Poland between 1979 and 1987. Most concern the residents of a Warsaw nursing home —Benski was long the director of the city's State Social Welfare Home for the Aged —and all touch, directly or indirectly, on the lives of old men and women who sometimes think "it was easier to live through the war than it is to live through the memories of it."

There is something of an Old Testament clarity and directness about these stories—they are all solid nouns and forceful verbs and characters who bare themselves in every word and deed. The sentences are as simple as the artist can make them and are rendered by Walter Arndt into an English of beautiful utility. Few of these stories run more than eight pages, some consist almost entirely of dialogue, and all make use of a primer-like vocabulary; they are minimal in every respect except their moral content, reminding one that minimalism in fiction need not be synonymous with trivialism. One finishes this collection moved by its very austerity, and with the hope that other books by Benski will soon make their way into English. By the evidence of *Missing Pieces*, he is surely among the minor masters of recent East European fiction.

—*Christopher Carduff*

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Notebook

Gordon Bunshaft, 1909-1990

by Mildred F. Schmertz

At 10:00 A.M. on Wednesday, September 19, the Museum of Modern Art held a memorial tribute to the distinguished modernist architect Gordon Bunshaft, who died August 6 at the age of eighty-one. Few of New York's prominent architects missed it, in spite of the early hour, and Skidmore, Owings & Merrill—the venerable firm that was Bunshaft's home for over four decades—was represented in full force. The eulogists were Richard E. Oldenburg, director of MOMA, William Rubin, former director of the museum's Department of Painting and Sculpture, David Rockefeller, and architects Edward C. Bassett and Leon Moed of SOM, Philip Johnson, and Kevin Roche. For anyone in the large turnout interested in the art of contemporary architecture, seeking clues to its future, or perhaps even trying to learn lessons from its past, the eulogies had little to offer. After all, a eulogy is a eulogy, not a critique. But the eulogists, who spoke independently and obviously without collusion, unwittingly made today's architecture appear to be without values, principles, or genuine art. In contrast, Bunshaft's works, and the modern movement to which he contributed so much, were made to seem part of a lost golden age.

Oldenburg, for example, praised the architect's qualities of mind and eye, as well as his connoisseurship of contemporary art, seeing in his large collection of painting and sculpture the reservoir from which he drew to sustain his own creative life. Oldenburg also lauded Bunshaft's carefully arranged matches between architecture and sculpture, particularly those in New York, including Jean Dubuffet's *Four Trees* at One Chase Manhattan Plaza and Henry Moore's reclining figure in the reflecting pool near the theater entrance of the Library-Museum at Lincoln Center.

William Rubin came right out and said that he liked Nine West Fifty-seventh Street, a building many consider Bunshaft's biggest (in all senses of the word) mistake. The gargantuan scale of the forty-six-story slope-skirted glass tower is fine with him, just *because* it overwhelms the Plaza Hotel and neighboring skyscrapers. "I like Bunshaft's unwillingness to go along," he said, "his willingness not to fit in. Great buildings change their environments." Rubin left the audience to assume that he meant change for the better.

Among the architects who spoke, Charles Bassett, retired partner of SOM's San Francisco office, and Leon Moed, currently a partner of SOM in New York, remembered Bunshaft with affection as a colleague and teacher. Kevin Roche, drawing on an earlier citation he had written for Bunshaft, noted that

> For many years [Bunshaft] has been the leading exponent and most influential practitioner of modern architecture in this country and almost single-handedly has created the current form and character of high-rise office buildings and set the standards for large suburban headquar-

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> ters . . . . Gordon Bunshaft chose to practice architecture as an art in the most difficult of all ways—in a large office—and for almost half a century he [dominated] what must be the most successful architectural partnership by any measure in history.

Roche concluded by adding, "He was a lovely man."

Philip Johnson didn't think so. He began his memorial tribute by confessing that he and Bunshaft hated each other. "He was an irascible, nasty person. I was small, jealous and envious, because he was a better architect than I was. Gordon led the epigoni who followed Mies and Le Corbusier. He was the greatest architect of his generation." Translation: Johnson's Bunshaft led a generation of inferior descendants of earlier masters, yet managed to be the best architect of his era. But were not these descendants rather easy to beat?

To put Bunshaft at the top of his generation's most gifted list among Americans is to forget Eero Saarinen (1910-1961), Louis Kahn (1901-1974), and Paul Rudolph (b. 1918). But Bunshaft was certainly *one* of the best of his day. Mies van der Rohe, having achieved a genuine style, was the greater architect, but Bunshaft, no mere epigone, was to become almost as good a Miesian as Mies. His pivotal work, Lever House (1952), across Park Avenue from Mies's Seagram Building, embodies and fulfills the aesthetic dreams of the first modernists. It is abstract in conception, clear in form, pure in proportion, free of the unessential. Its machine-made materials, glass and stainless steel, were put together with the highest degree of technological sophistication available in the early Fifties. The glass and metal are lustrous, reflective, and seem light as air. The building is disciplined, ordered, legible, classical, elegant. Most of the thirty major buildings completed during his career can also be thus described, but especially three in New York City, the Manufacturers Hanover Trust Company, the high-rise Chase Manhattan Bank, and the Union Carbide Headquarters. To these must be added the low-rise suburban headquarters of Connecticut General, and American Can.

Unfortunately, modernism had few disciples as talented as Bunshaft. *He* begot *true* epigoni, all over the world, whose bland, debased modernism, helped along by postmodern polemic that chose not to make the fine distinctions between the best modern architecture and the worst, virtually destroyed the movement in the United States. By 1970, at the beginning of Bunshaft's last decade at SOM, even the most faithful modernists had begun to falter. Fewer and fewer architects—or, more to the point, their clients—continued to find beauty and relevance in abstract and unornamented buildings.

Bunshaft made it to seventy at SOM, retiring in 1979 after forty-two years with the firm. SOM's New York, Chicago, Washington, and San Francisco offices were by then being taken over by the next generation, postmodern classicists all. Today they are firmly in charge. SOM buildings for the past decade have been draped in historicized pastiche in the name of contextualism.

Had Bunshaft been sixty instead of seventy in 1979, he probably would have quit. His last years at SOM, however, still offered opportunities and challenges for a modernist master. True, clients like Chase Manhattan, Union Carbide, Connecticut General, and American Can were turning up less often, big business having lost its ambition to commission masterworks in any style. The institutional market had also declined. Academic and cultural building clientele, once reliable sponsors of better architecture, no longer had building budgets big enough to meet SOM's minimum standards of design and construction, not to speak of its fees. Fortunately for SOM, new customers had appeared, the big developers. Unable to distinguish between modernism's seminal works and its tired copies, but bored by the lot, they were demanding a new look as different as possible from the reviled glass box, sending SOM in search of new styles. Because Philip Johnson had not yet shown

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the way, his historically adorned standard skyscraper for AT&T not having been completed until 1978, SOM's efforts to transform itself led to a loss of rigor and discipline in their uses of modernism, rather than to genuine invention.

Loyal as he was to modernism's forms and methods of technological creation, the world of mega real estate was not a happy place for Bunshaft. Lucky for him, work opened up in Saudi Arabia. The Saudi princes knew what they wanted and it wasn't postmodernism, simply because they had never heard of it. His two last, and among his greatest, buildings are in Jeddah.

The National Commercial Bank, on a splendid site between the Red Sea and a lagoon, is a twenty-seven-story tower, invented in response to the region's hot, damp climate. Triangular in plan, it has three triangular atria vertically stacked within it, great, sunlit, shaftlike spaces that open into each other, the outside, and the sky. The atria are seven, nine, and seven stories high, respectively, and are offset from each other, forming deep oases that screen and cool the building's curtain walls, as they funnel air upward. From the exterior the building reads as a slender stone-veneered tower with three huge rectangular openings, two on the entrance façade, one on another, letting air and light into the atria. Only 40 percent efficient in its ratio of banking and office space to total volume (the Saudis wanted a big building, but rich as they are had no need to pack it), the structure is not the promising prototype for the typical hot-climate skyscraper that some have deemed it. Nevertheless, this tower is a masterfully realized true invention and a great beauty.

Although Bunshaft will be remembered longest as the most able of all the architects of his era who served big business, the Saudis, ironically, by engaging SOM to design the Haj Terminal, were to give him his first and only chance to design in behalf of the poor. It is unlikely that the utopian dream of architecture as a force for social good that propelled early modernists like Walter Gropius ever drove Bunshaft. But the planning, design, and technological challenge of this way station for airborne pilgrims to Mecca, among the world's most impoverished, flying in from places like Chad, was met with genius. In collaboration with SOM's late Fazlur Khan, Bunshaft created a permanent tent city, the tents themselves a technological wonder, that once a year shelters fifty thousand pilgrims for periods of up to eighteen hours during arrival and eighty thousand pilgrims for as many as thirty-six hours during departure. Under the beautiful fabric shelter are toilets, shops, benches, and banking facilities. Designed so that the rural villagers can camp on the floor, it is a work of architecture that eloquently speaks to the dignity and meaning of Islamic pilgrimage.

The Jeddah bank and the Haj Terminal would have been hard acts to follow, but Bunshaft, by retiring at seventy, didn't have to try. Throughout his long career his talent appears to have been aided at every turn by good fortune, capped at the end by the most timely of exits.

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Letters

Mark Strand and the Pulitzer

To the Editors:
In "Visiting the Gregorys" (September 1990) Robert Phillips says that Mark Strand was "deprived" of the Pulitzer Prize for verse because his being awarded the prize was "leaked" before the official announcement, and the "committee" therefore awarded the prize to someone else. As I was chairman of the Pulitzer jury for verse that year I am able to say that this did not happen.

There were three jurors: John Ashbery, Nona Balakian, and I. Ashbery and Balakian wished to award the prize to Mark Strand for a book of prose poems. I pointed out that this could not be done, as the Pulitzer regulations stated that the prize was to be given to a book of verse. They then wished to give the prize to Strand for a book of verse he had also published that year. I reported this to the board; it was the majority opinion and I must yield to it, but I did not agree. Strand's verse had been commended for its restraint—in my report to the board I quoted these lines by Roy Campbell:

On Some South African Novelists

You praise the firm restraint with which they write—
I'm with you there of course:
They use the snaffle and the curb all right,
But where's the bloody horse?

I said that I thought Robert Penn Warren's book stronger than Mark Strand's, and that it would be my choice. Then I left for a ten-week visit to Australia. While there I heard that the prize had gone to Penn Warren.

On my return to the States I found that the difference of opinion between Ashbery and Balakian on one side and myself on the other had been reported in the newspapers. Since confidentiality had been breached so freely I wouldn't be at all surprised if someone had, indeed, told Strand that he was awarded the prize. If so, he must have been keenly disappointed. But Robert Phillips's statement is unfounded. The Pulitzer board did not "deprive" Strand of the prize, for he never had it. The board must have thought, as I did, that Penn Warren's was the better book.

Louis Simpson
Setauket, NY

Robert Phillips replies:
Inasmuch as the names of jurors for the Pulitzer Prize in any year are not generally known to the public, I was unable to check the veracity of this widely circulated story. Now that Mr. Simpson has revealed himself to have been chairman of the jury for the year in question, I am grateful to him for clarification. But Mr. Simpson's letter raises another question: Have the Pulitzer regulations changed since the year he was chairman, or was the most recent jury either less punctilious or allowed to ignore the regulations altogether? The 1990 Pulitzer Prize for Poetry was awarded to Charles Simic for *The World Does Not End*, a book of prose poems. It isn't I who labels it as such. "Prose Poems" is the book's subtitle. It would appear that the jury was determined to give Mr. Simic the prize, whether he had written a book of verse or not. (He hadn't.)

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